evolution

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by StratsWrote, YouAreMyDesign

Summary

> “Does it distress you?”
>
> “Does what distress me?” Will asks.
>
> “The idea of being taken care of.”

Notes

> A note from Strats: By now everyone knows what to expect from YAMD, but I just want to remind my usual readers to check the tags and take care of themselves. This is not a nice fic. I hope you love it.

Chapter 1

Will doesn't scene.

Scenes require intimacy, trust. The expectation that when you crack open your rib cage, the other person will not dig their teeth into your heart. That safety and care will be taken, that all of your pieces will end up back in the same place they started out in.

There have been a few halfhearted moments over the years, partners tied down in the backseat of his car, whining and keening in drunken artifice. High school sex ed tells you to always play sober, but it is only when drunk that Will can indulge in his needs. You see less in people's eyes when your own are glazing over.

Will's current dry period is going on its fourth year. The last person to hit on him was another dominant, mistaking silence for subservience. A recurring theme, honestly.

Work already eats into Will's thrilling routine of sitting quietly at home with his dogs. A relationship, someone waiting on their knees for Will to care and to command, would only eat further at Will. Will is running out of self to offer.

Friendship, though, friendship could be tolerable. The quiet acceptance of similarities, of shared interests, mutual hobbies. Dr. Lecter does not expect more from Will than the occasional meal, does not run screaming at the sight of a mutilated corpse. He has no submissive of his own, and so has never questioned Will's lack.

There is a sense of peace in being understood, one far greater than the peace Will has only rarely found in dominance.

Still, it is a gentler, less satisfying peace. The kind that does not come from a good meal, but like waking up first thing in the morning. Groggy, impatient - the alarm has gone off and he has to go about his day. Hannibal's presence is soothing, far from the prickly, instinctive dominance displays it's all too easy to fall prey to, but it doesn't calm the jitters in Will, doesn't make his knee stay still, or his fingers stop curling against the armrest.

Hannibal's head tilts, in full view. It's not smart to sneak up on each other, they both know that. His eyes fall to the restless kneading of Will's fingertips against the leather of the chair, his lips purse just a fraction.

"Have you been having any more distressing dreams?" he murmurs. Will winces, internally, but refuses to look farther away than Hannibal's perfectly knotted tie. Soft, garish for its bright orange and purple swirls. Yet, of course, suited to him, as always. Will tries not to think about how it would feel wrapped around his knuckles, how it would feel to pull it tight until he heard the telltale little gasp of interrupted airflow.

He exhales, as slowly as he can manage. "I'm not sure I should call them 'distressing'," he replies. Admits, in a voice that comes out too rough.

Hannibal's cheeks bulge, as he smiles in that way that Will thinks a submissive would find rather evocative, desperate for a glimpse at what he's thinking. Even Will, with all his empathy and understanding, can have trouble with it. Hannibal's eyes are dark, giving nothing away.

"Yet, they cause distress," he replies smoothly, and nods to Will's fidgeting hand. Will flattens it immediately, frowning at his own behavior. Hannibal's acknowledgement of his tics isn't new, but the comment and correction feels dangerously close to - to something. Something impossible, that goes against their natures.

"Distress is a normal reaction to my life, the things I see." The leather feels smooth under Will's palm, grounding. It grates at him, pulls at old, disused instincts. He lets his knee continue to shake, a small moment of defiance.

Defiance. An odd choice of words to describe the concern of a friend. A prickle of suspicion creeps up Will's spine. But then, Will has always scrutinized the motivations of others.

"We are none of us normal," Hannibal says. "Oddities make up individuality."

"Everyone is special," Will replies. The sort of thing one tells children, as they seek to measure where others end and they begin. "You don't need to placate me."

"Of course not. You are, after all, not distressed."

Placating, chastening. Seeking to soothe Will, to find the root of his ire. A parent coddling a child.

Or a dominant, coddling a submissive.

There is, of course, the third option of psychiatrist treating patient, but that dynamic has not fit them since the very first moment Hannibal looked over Will's file. And Hannibal's eyes are as masked as always. Will has played enough poker to know when to show your hand and when to check.

"Dreams are a funny thing," he says, "pulling apart memory and subconscious. We remember things in our dreams that we have long forgotten in our waking lives. We observe our lives through different lenses."

"Different lenses," Will echoes. To his parroting, Hannibal merely inclines his head. Will mimics him, and then does look away, to the desk, to the ladder, to the second floor. He rises, unable to stand, suddenly, the feeling of the leather under his hands. Too close, too close for comfort, making him wish for sharper nails and a sturdier grip.

Hannibal watches him, because cats always watch intruders in their home, even when those visitors are welcome. Will feels the weight of his gaze as he paces slowly to the desk, finds Hannibal's pen askew by his appointment book, and corrects it. It's an instinct Hannibal allows him, maybe uniquely, and he knows that, if he were to look, he would see a flash of amusement in his eyes.

“Tell me, Dr. Lecter,” he says, even, low. Controlled, because even outside a scene he would do well not to antagonize a potential equal, or better. “What kind of lenses do you think I use in my dreams?”

He turns, and gives the man a thin smile. “I’m sure you have your theories.”

Hannibal inclines his head again, and looks at the chair Will vacated. His legs are folded, one knee over the other, and his foot moves up just a fraction. Will turns away again, continuing his little circle.

“I do,” he admits. Any given ground with someone like Hannibal Lecter is never easily won. He is not a man to cede to anyone. “But I would rather hear it from you, first.” Will huffs, lips turning down. Just like a dominant, to ask, to assess. Placating. Biding time. Another fissure of defiance flares up at him and he resists the urge to snap something rude and unwarranted. Hannibal is his friend, as much as he can have a friend. Not someone Will should annoy just for the sake of his pride. He is sure Hannibal’s control, vast and capable though it is, has limits, even with him.

“In my dreams, I see much the same way I do while awake.” It is not quite the counterpoint it sounds, and Will knows without looking that Hannibal understands.

“Your life is made up of many lenses besides your own,” Hannibal agrees. “You slip in and out of the perspectives of others. The amorphous nature of dreams must be dizzying for you.”

“No more so than the amorphous nature of reality.” Will’s steady pace brings him past the chair again; his fingertips trace over the leather, seeking sensation. Hannibal watches him, purposeful, pointed. Will drags his hand away.

“Is reality so unstable for you?”

Friends, they may be, but Hannibal always seems to find the appropriate words to dig in under his skin, prying at the very meat of him.

“Instability is a subjective concept,” Will tells him. “Am I unstable because I can see another’s perspective as easily as my own? Because I can shift between movies and turn the camera?”

“How often and how thorough are the shifts?”

Will laughs quietly. That’s the million dollar question, isn’t it? “I find I am entirely myself today.”

“Am I so difficult to see?”

No. Not quite. Will can see in Hannibal hope, disappointment. A desire for the intimacy of understanding. Will grins, or tries to. He thinks it comes out more uncertain than anything else, when he’s never quite able to pin Hannibal down.

“I think you would like to be,” Will tells him, “but not in this room. You spread out to fill the spaces here. You’re encompassing.”

Hannibal's head tilts. Will has made a second circuit, and pauses by the ladder when he sees Hannibal rise. His hands slide into the pockets of his suit pants, like he needs to restrain them. Maybe hide fidgets of his own.

"Encompassing is a word we use to describe God," Hannibal murmurs, his steps almost idle, but Will knows a hunting cat when he sees one, and knows he is coming closer, no matter how circuitous and apparently random his route. He raises a brow. "It is...smothering. Protective."

He's by the corner of his desk now, and looks down to the pen Will straightened. A flash of humor passes across his face, there and gone again, quicker than a blink. Will presses his lips together and retreats from the ladder.

"Grandiose," Hannibal adds, and Will hums, dragging his knuckles across the far edge of the desk, putting it between them. He finds that it is not unlike circling sharks around a spill of blood, but he can't help thinking that Hannibal is not a shark intent on a mutual feast. His eyes are not on the blood in the water.

"You like to see yourself as protective," Will says. "That's textbook. Nurturing. Capable."

"Mm." Hannibal's head tilts again, and Will fights the urge to mimic him. He goes back to his chair, and sits, because at least this way, from where he is, Hannibal cannot sneak up on him. Hannibal's eyes follow him, dark and impassive, and he gives a single nod of acknowledgement, almost to himself. He lets out another soft, contemplative sound, and turns his eyes away, to the little wine cabinet in the corner of the room.

Will's gaze follows his. He presses his lips together. He won't ask. Asking to be served is something that doesn't fit within the parameters of their relationship; never has, never will. Their natures are too contradictory, or perhaps too similar, to allow it.

His mouth is dry, though, as Hannibal takes purposeful steps towards the cabinet. Will would claim a genuine thirst, but the dampness of his palms betrays him. Will would not say Hannibal makes him nervous. Just…contemplative.

Hannibal pours the wine without being asked, but nor does he offer. Instead, he presumes. He holds a glass out to Will, red and rich. Robust. Full-bodied. Will hesitates with his hand wrapped around the stem. A glass of wine or a body? How easily his thoughts have slid into the inappropriate, and he wonders if it's his own doing or Hannibal's.

He sees it now, in Hannibal's focused gaze, in the way his own fingers linger on the glass, drawing slow against Will's as he pulls away.

How long has Hannibal looked at him that way? Intense, wanting. Hannibal doesn't *yearn,* on the contrary, his desire seems entirely confident.

Will lets the wine slick his throat, slick his conversation. "I can't offer you something to nurture, Hannibal."

Hannibal's head tilts, a small flutter of lashes almost like a blink - surprise. Maybe that Will chose to be so uncharacteristically forthcoming. Or maybe it's fake, so that he can protect himself from the barb of rejection. Will can't quite tell, and hates that he can't quite tell.

"Nurturing is subjective," he says, and Will doesn't know what he expected Hannibal to say, but he's certain that wasn't it. His brow creases as Hannibal smiles at him, and turns away to take his seat. He sits as he always has, one leg folded over the other, the picture of ease as he reclines in his chair. He eyes Will over his glass of wine. "Does it distress you?"

"Does what distress me?" Will asks.

"The idea of being taken care of."

Will frowns. It's not a question of *distress*, it's simply not in his nature. Like asking a wolf to describe a craving for salad. Will takes care of people - he hunts and provides, guards his pack of dogs at home, purposefully avoids taking on a submissive to the inevitable conclusion of failure.

"A God can be equally capable of divine wrath, as nurturing, protection, all the rest," Hannibal continues, and Will presses his lips together, edges them against the rim of the glass. He takes a sip, lets the wine flood his mouth with rich flavor. Lets it coat his tongue, loosen it, sliding down his throat.

"There you go with God again," Will murmurs, awkwardly trying to cover the sudden tension with his attempt at humor. He sees Hannibal's cheeks bulge again, that not-smile, fond. A parent watching their child puzzle through algebra. A dominant watching their submissive learn to lean into a beating. Will's fingers clench tight around the wine glass stem, and he forces himself to loosen them before he breaks the delicate glass. He clears his throat. "Your ego is showing."

"And there you go, with your deflection," Hannibal says warmly. "I've struck a nerve."

"Mm. One you've been rooting around for, for quite some time," Will answers, challenging. Defiant. He takes another drink, wetting his lower lip to chase the sweet aftertaste. Hannibal inclines his head - acknowledgement, or apology, Will doesn't know. He hates that he doesn't know, and finds, for perhaps the first time, that he wishes he could. That he could take the lens from Hannibal's eyes and place it on his own. That he could *see*, and know, with utter clarity, what Hannibal is thinking.

As it always does, the true nature of Hannibal's thoughts evades him. So, again, he says; "I don't need protecting. Or nurturing."

"Then I suppose," Hannibal answers, still just as at ease as ever, smiling in a way that brightens his eyes, "what's left is wrath." His head tilts. "Is that the kind of dominant you are, Will? Wrathful?" Will blinks at him, his shoulders tensing. Hannibal has never asked that of him before, never broached the subject; their shared dominant natures were things acknowledged like eye color and accent, noted and filed away, but never commented on. The sharks are circling tighter.

“Retired,” Will says slowly. “Dominant as God. Classic. Archaic, some might say.”

“Some might,” Hannibal agrees, “And others would find it pleasing. There is an appeal to a sense of safety, to the knowledge that someone is waiting at the bottom of the pit.”

“To catch you, or to be crushed beneath your corpse?” Will swallows the last of his wine and finds himself longing for more, if only to have a use for his hands.

“Which were you, before your untimely retirement?”

Will sighs and leans back in his seat. He fidgets, passing the empty glass from one hand to the next. “Casual,” he says, “and impermanent.”

“Avoiding a sense of responsibility.”

Will’s eyes narrow, the corner of his lip pulling back in a snarl. “I have seven dogs. I let Jack Crawford drag me around the Delmarva peninsula on a whim.”

“Responsibility to another person requires a more intimate level of revelation. A significant amount of change. We change ourselves to better fit our edges together.”

“Little about me is changeable, barring a sudden miraculous peace in the city with one of the highest murder rates in the country.”

Hannibal hums, and then sits forward. Both feet plant themselves on the floor, his elbows on his knees, glass held almost cavalierly in front of him. In danger of falling. Will presses his lips together, fighting the urge to reach for it and place it on the table along with his empty one, once he finally gets up the wherewithal to release it. Hannibal’s stance is not threatening, there’s no need to be on edge around it, but this whole conversation has put him on the defensive,and he feels like an animal with its teeth on show, hackles raised.

Hannibal’s eyes meet his. Dominants always maintain eye contact, it’s one of the other things that has gotten Will mistaken for a submissive in the past. He doesn’t like it; doesn’t like the lenses, the solar flares, the whiplash of another person brushing the edges of his mind. But he doesn’t want to be cowed a second time, because he’s sure Hannibal will take it as a victory, and well, his restrained pride only extends so far.

“You are the very essence of change, Will,” Hannibal says. “To take on another’s mantle, and ease it off at the end of the day.” He smiles, wide enough to show his teeth. “Not unlike God.”

Will huffs, and runs a hand through his hair, down the back of his neck. He feels too warm, shared space and determined central heating to fight back the cold outside combining with the flush of alcohol.

“If….” He stops, swallows, tries again. “If that’s true, then it doesn’t end well for me.”

Hannibal’s head tilts.

“We all know what happens in the Bible, Dr. Lecter.”

Hannibal smiles. “Then I suppose it simply comes down to this, Will - when that pit inevitably opens up, and swallows you whole, will you crush whoever tries to catch you, or let yourself be caught?”

Coaxing. *Predatory*. Will can’t maintain eye contact anymore, and looks back to the knot of Hannibal’s tie. His fingers flex, and spread wide on the arm of the chair.

“Now,” Hannibal says, standing abruptly and startling Will into the instinctive freeze response. Fight or freeze - fleeing is not an option. Not for people like him. He holds out his hand, and nods at Will’s empty glass. “I think that’s enough melancholic illumination for one night. Would you like some more wine?”

Will looks to his glass. His mouth is dry. He’s very aware of how close Hannibal is, how tall he seems when he’s the only one standing. His fingers curl. He wants another glass, but -.

“I should be getting home,” he says, and stands as well, setting the glass down and circling the chair to put some distance between them, grabbing his coat from the back of it. He doesn’t let Hannibal take it for him, that’s not what their relationship is about. “I’ll see you next week, Dr. Lecter.”

“Drive safely, Will,” Hannibal replies. He doesn’t seem put out by Will’s sudden departure. Then again, he rarely does. Will wants to say he leaves Hannibal’s office with calm, measured steps, and that his hands don’t shake when he gets to his car and fidgets with his keys. He can’t.

He blames it on the wine.

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The warmth of eyes on his skin travels up his spine, lingers around his shoulders, the pale skin of his bare throat. It brackets him where he stands, pins him. He can’t run. He doesn’t want to.

Will has always found safety in danger, in the familiarity of fear. His senses are sharp-edged, they slice at him when he tries to find his grip.

Knowing is not always beneficial. Knowing can be painful. Knowing can rip the floorboards out from under you and send you toppling.

What Will knows is darkness. The fall. The rush of wind, stealing breath from his lungs. Who waits at the bottom, arms outstretched.

Will is spread out on his stomach, heavy weight over his back, hands trailing up his arms to pin his own.

“I’ve caught you,” Hannibal whispers, and he has such sharp teeth when they catch against Will’s shoulders.

To toy with, as a cat, or to devour, as a wolf? Will certainly feels devoured as he’s spread open, as heat and pleasure pool in the base of his spine. Hannibal has more hands than he

should; he slides a palm down the center of Will's chest, and yet Will still cannot move.

Will's heart is hammering, the rush of blood in his ears not even close to loud enough to drown out the sound of Hannibal's exhale against his ear. He's never paid close enough attention to Hannibal's breathing before, his physical tics or lack thereof are more than enough to occupy his time, and Will could certainly dig deep furrows into the emotions he hides in his eyes. It's strange, to hear Hannibal panting, breathing hard. Like they lie entwined together in the wake of a sprint to dizzying heights where the air is thin. Like a long battle, the smoke finally clearing.

Will presses his lips together, closes his eyes though it does nothing to block out the feeling of Hannibal's hands, too many hands, gripping his wrists and his hips and touching down his chest. A pinch, too-sharp at his nipple, makes him yelp. He tries to capture it behind his teeth. Another hand goes to his hair, twisting - gentle, but firm, a tug with a too-wide grip so Will doesn't get a sharp, single stabbing sensation in his scalp, but the burn of peeling back skin. It creates a mirroring fissure of heat in his neck, his jaw aching from grinding his teeth.

There's another ache, planting itself under Hannibal's hand, a seed taking route. His stomach is so warm, his back stinging from friction, sweat-soft, pink. He's pinned and helpless and yes, yes, he's certainly caught. Like an animal in a trap.

His fingers curl into fists and he clenches his eyes tightly shut, trembling, prone. He doesn't like it, he doesn't want it - but when Hannibal's hand brushes with searing tenderness across the nape of his neck, Will's lips part, and what comes out is not a rough demand to stop, but a near-silent plea. For mercy. For more.

"Hush, Will, it's alright," Hannibal whispers to him, and the bottom of the pit is coming up fast. Within the darkness, teeth and eyes shine, and arms reach up. Too many arms with too-sharp nails. In a voice dark with promise, a threat that sends a sharp spike of electricity down his spine, he adds; "I'll catch you. One way or another."

Will wakes gasping and terrified and *hard*, already shoving a grasping hand into his sweat-soaked boxers. His orgasm comes with confusion and shame, comorbid feelings that have begun to linger under his skin as the days pass.

It isn't uncommon for dominants to develop crushes on other dominants. A good 8% of people are Same Dynamic Oriented.

But Will never has been. A lack of intimacy is not the same as a lack of desire, and his fantasies have been almost mind-numbingly typical. Even now, recalling the dream only fills him with a lingering sense of discomfort, and, yes, distress. Hannibal would be so smug.

Will pushes those thoughts away. Dreams are subconscious coming to the forefront, but that does not make them subconscious *desires.* Will is only seeing things through the lens Hannibal has given him, the sheen of Hannibal's affection discoloring Will's own feelings underneath.

Affection is not inherently sexual either. Will gets up to shower and doesn't think about it.

—

The wine pairs well with pork, cooked so thoroughly as to fall apart in Will's mouth, a bursting haze of flavor. Hannibal watches, as he always does for Will's first bite, waiting to see if the meal passes muster.

Dinner may have been a bad idea. Friends have dinner. Hannibal and Jack have had dinner, and Will is fully aware that Hannibal regards Jack with platonic distance.

But if Will is trying to dissuade affections he is not entirely certain Hannibal *feels*, dinner alone in Hannibal's home may be sending mixed signals.

The fact of the matter is that Will cannot, by virtue of their relationship, change his pattern if he doesn't want Hannibal to take notice. He *doesn't* want Hannibal to take notice. He has prepared forts garrisoned to the teeth, armies on top of armies, charges in the seas and mountains of his mind ready to blow, should Hannibal broach the subject of dreams, of distress, again.

Because Will is not, when it comes down to it, good at hiding a pure truth. Yes, he can cloak it, disguise it, misdirect and illusion the seeker away. But Hannibal is just as good at sniffing out truths as Will is bad at hiding them. So the only option is to pretend there is nothing to hide. They are friends, having dinner. Hannibal looks at him in a way that makes Will think his place would be better suited *on* the table than at it.

They've had dinner before. Will can't just stop going to sessions, can't start refusing invitations especially since Hannibal seems to know everyone Will knows, and he can't make excuses. Maybe, if he continues on like nothing is amiss, eventually it will be so.

He clears his throat and gives a small nod, easing Hannibal's unspoken anticipatory stare. Hannibal smiles; the food is good, appeases his guest, and therefore he can sit back and enjoy it himself. He's always like that. The mouse comes too close and is caught in his claws, but devouring so lovingly, with honor. Worship.

Will smiles to himself, drawing Hannibal's attention again. A raised brow; no voiced question. A predator doesn't give its position away by roaring first. Will turns his attention back to the meal, bowstring tension stretching between them, silence that is heavy and only broken by the clink of silverware against porcelain, the rustle of cloth napkins wiping at mouths, the very faint bubbling trickle of wine whenever Hannibal refills Will's glass.

Will was raised on whiskey, neat, and swallowed in heavy mouthfuls. His tolerance has stretched over the years, but Hannibal's wine still warms him, sits heavy in his stomach and burns dull embers up through his chest.

Between careful conversation, Will drinks, slow sips of a second glass, a third. He should say no to the fourth, but he doesn't, tending to it the same way he tends the others.

"I've a guest room, should you need it," Hannibal tells him over small bites of delicate dessert tarts.

“I’ve driven in worse,” Will says, wincing. “God, that sounds awful, doesn’t it? I don’t drive *drunk.* I just meant that…. Well, it’s only a few glasses of wine.”

“I trust your judgement. I suppose this means you won’t stay for a nightcap in the study?”

Will knows he shouldn’t. He *just* had this conversation with himself mere minutes ago. But when Hannibal clears the dishes and pours brandy for them both, Will takes his with a small murmur of thanks.

The late hour means nothing to Will, nor the drive home. He’ll sleep whenever he lands, or he won’t, and one day will bleed into the next, one body much the same as the others. Hannibal and his labyrinthian conversations are the only break in his monotony these days. Nursing his drink, Will wonders when the last time was that he let someone slide so thoroughly into his life. When the last time was that he sustained so much contact with something that didn’t walk on four legs and bark.

Neither of them are still tonight. Will, with his fidgeting, Hannibal, with his endless desire to command a room, circling the waters while Will trails fingers over his shelves and decorations.

It happens at the bookshelf, Will caught in titles he recognizes, in the soft, well-loved spines of novels he’s read. Hannibal’s circle brings him closer, too close for Will to sidestep from his corner, and….

“Did you just *smell* me?”

“Difficult to avoid,” comes the reply, and Will’s head snaps to one side. He glares at Hannibal, standing too close, and bodily angles his shoulder so that Hannibal is forced to step away from him, like he might nudge his dogs when they get a little too curious around his cooler of fish. And just like a dog, Hannibal follows him as Will retreats. “Such an unfortunate choice in aftershave. It smells like something that has a ship on the bottle.”

“I keep getting it for Christmas,” Will replies. With distance, his hackles lower. Hannibal doesn’t seem intent on chasing him around the room. Wordlessly, he smiles, and hands Will his brandy glass over the back of a couch. Will takes it, takes a long swallow of it, lets it burn his throat and fire-coat his retort; “I didn’t appreciate that.”

“My apologies, Will,” Hannibal replies with a single nod of his head. But he doesn’t look sorry. Will glares at his shoes and swallows the rest of his brandy, full-mouthed with fire. “I wonder why you keep wearing it, then. A Christmas gift from someone who clearly doesn’t know what would compliment your scent - you could easily throw it out.”

“Maybe I like it,” he hisses.

“Mm. Maybe it reminds you of someone,” Hannibal agrees, lips pursed, gaze far away, on the bookshelves. “Or, perhaps, you know it’s a rather obnoxious scent, and it helps keep people at a distance.”

Will's eyes narrow. He fights the urge to bare his teeth, and manages not to, but it's a close thing. "Stop that," he snaps.

"Stop what?"

"I'm not interested in being your protégé, Hannibal." Hannibal's eyes snap to him, giving another of those slow blinks that's meant to imply surprise at being caught. It's not unheard of, for an older dominant to take a younger one under their wing, to train and guide them through navigating their nature. Will can't even fault him for trying - Hannibal has a powerful streak of nurturing and protective instinct in him, even if he tries to hide it. If he can't fuck Will, the next best thing would be to train him - submitting without submitting.

Hannibal presses his lips together, and they turn down at the corners. "I didn't mean to imply -."

"Yes, you did." Will's teeth feel too sharp in his mouth, his grip too strong around the brandy glass clutched in his hand. He shakes his head, running a hand through his hair. The room is too warm. "I'm leaving."

"You've had a great deal to drink, Will."

"You're neither my father nor my mentor, Hannibal." Will's skin feels slightly too tight, the hot rush of embarrassment and outrage rising to the surface. That it was no doubt spurred on by the alcohol was something Will disregarded for his own sanity.

"You are welcome to storm out just as angrily come morning. I'll even act surprised, if you like."

Will whirls on him, teeth bared. Hannibal stares back, placid, unaffected. He's always like that, no ripples over his surface no matter how many rocks Will hurls, and what normally brings comfort is suddenly infuriating.

"I'm leaving," Will repeats, practically spits. Belatedly, he realizes he's still holding the brandy glass. He takes three steps to the fireplace and slams it down on the mantle, satisfied by the slightest twitch of displeasure on Hannibal's face, the barest hint of an unplanned response.

Hannibal says nothing as Will shoves past him, as he grabs his coat from the coat rack. He says nothing, until he has his arm wrapped firmly around Will's throat, dragging him back from the door. His grip is iron, unmoved by the frantic scrabble of Will's nails, by the kick Will aims back towards his shin.

"You should know that I've little patience for brattiness," Hannibal murmurs, his lips soft against Will's ear, sharply juxtaposed to the painful pressure against his trachea. "I'll expect more from you in the future."

Will has been a cop, a special agent, a scrappy child on the playground. None of them prepared him for the black at the edge of his vision, the rattle of his own helpless voice,

strangled in his throat. The hand that seals over his nose and mouth and will not be moved by the jagged edges of Will's bitten nails.

He thinks, with a bitter edge, that at least Hannibal's DNA will be under his nails when and if they ever find his body. The edges of his vision are turning black, and then red, his brain on fire from lack of oxygen. He fights past the coat rack, the bottom of the stairs, as Hannibal hauls him towards the kitchen like he is little more of a struggle than a particularly large bag of groceries. Hannibal's heart, beating against his back, is steady as ever, his breathing even, if a little labored from the exertion.

Hannibal throws him to the ground in the kitchen, and Will gasps, heaving as his burning lungs are suddenly given air again, only to have it knocked out of them as Hannibal flattens him to his belly, sits on his hips so he can't get the leverage to buck or kick, and wraps both hands around his throat. Pressure, to the sides of his neck, where blood rushes thickest. Suffocation by blood loss is a lot quicker.

"Hannibal," he rasps, clawing at the kitchen floor, at Hannibal's hands, reaching back to futilely paw at his knees, his arms, anything he can reach. It's all for naught. His vision is going black again, his breathing labored, his heart beating triple-time in his chest as he feels the heaviness of unconsciousness threaten to swallow him whole.

In the end, the other shark didn't bite. It doesn't need to. One swift bump to Will's underbelly, and he's stunned and drowning, falling into the black chasm of the ocean and away from the light. His eyes close, and he goes limp, and the last thing he feels is Hannibal's hand sweeping tenderly through his hair, and Hannibal's warm exhale at his ear.

"It's going to be okay, Will," he says, and Will hears it through a fog. "I've got you."

———

Will wakes to the sensation of floating. His lungs feel paper-thin, plugged up and coated with gauze. His neck is bruised, he's sure of it, and when he swallows and gasps his first conscious breath, finds the air cold and abrasive on his skin.

He opens his eyes, blinking blearily at his surroundings. Cold chrome, linoleum, stainless steel. A tealish hue to it all under the bright glare of too-stark lights. He's been stripped, his clothes sitting in a neat pile in his peripheral vision on a broad table much like he's seen in a morgue. A shiver of fear runs through him, making his fingers curl.

He looks up, wincing at the bright light, to find that his hands have been bound and lifted, tied to a meat hook with thick black rope that keeps him in a perma-lean, just stretched long enough to put his full weight on his feet, to sway a little, but not enough to get leverage to pull on the hook, nor to haul himself up and disengage it with his own hands.

He swallows, and spits a wad of too-thick saliva onto the floor. His head is pounding, hangover and abuse and the too-bright lights stinging the backs of his eyes, and he tries to control his breathing. His innate sense of time, unreliable though it may be, tells him he hasn't been out for long. Long enough to feel dehydrated, but blood asphyxiation can be recovered from quickly as soon as the pressure lets up.

Even through the thick haze of alcohol and fear, Will is who he is. The pieces line themselves up. Former surgeon. Unexpected strength. Baltimore local.

Mutilations were all committed pre-mortem. Will draws in a too-loud, too-thick breath. He's going to die. It's going to be painful. Instead of panic, Will feels numb. He feels like his life was always leading in this direction, sooner or later.

"How are you feeling?" A warm hand lands between Will's shoulder blades, and despite his resignation, Will jerks, startled. It gets him nothing but a firmer touch, a hand sliding down his spine and back up again, as if to soothe.

"Like hell," Will rasps. Hannibal clicks his tongue and steps around into Will's line of sight.

"Regrettable," he says, and looks almost as though he means it, the bastard. "I'd hoped to make the transition easier on you. You forced my hand, Will. I hope you've learned not to do so in the future."

Will blinks, his mind slogging through the conversation, peeling layers back to try and find the core. "By the future, I assume you mean the next hour or so? Are you about to tell me it will hurt less if I behave myself?"

"Yes," Hannibal tells him, reaching out to trace the pads of his fingers over the bruising of his throat, not enough pressure to hurt, but Will swallows back bile regardless. "You will even find it pleasurable, in time."

The words don't line up with murder, with a slow and agonizing death. Will reassesses, even as he tells himself he doesn't want to know, would rather sink back into oblivion than reach the obvious conclusion.

"You don't want to be my mentor," he whispers, "You want to be my dom."

A flash of approval shines in Hannibal's eyes, openly, the teal of the room making the red in them more obvious. He doesn't deny it, merely inclines his head in another nod. Will's fists clench, and he grinds his teeth together hard enough that it sends another powerful wave of pain up into his skull.

Hannibal's gaze slides down him, far too slow for Will's liking, and he shifts his weight uneasily, at once deeply sympathetic with animals when being eyed up for choice cuts or breeding stock. He shakes his head sharply. "You know that's not going to work. Whatever plan you have -."

"Hush, Will," Hannibal says, and steps close to him, taking his chin in hand. Will tells himself it's only fear of getting choked out again, of Hannibal changing his mind and ending his life once and for all, that leadens his tongue and makes him fall silent. He can get out of this, eventually. Hannibal, constant and assured though he is, is not God. He cannot command the seas part or the sky change color. He cannot make Will into something that's impossible; a submissive. Not just any submissive, *Hannibal's* submissive.

It won't work. Will is sure of that, in this instant. Their natures are too powerful, separate, misaligned. He will never sink to his knees and bow his head and find pleasure in it. He will never ache for the lash of a whip, the sting of a cane or bare hand, the bruising heat of a flogger. He will never call Hannibal 'Sir' or 'Master'. He *won't*.

Hannibal's eyes shine with mirth, his smile uncharacteristically wide. No sense hiding in the reefs now, Will thinks bitterly; the beachgoers know there's a shark in the water, there's a wolf in the trees.

Hannibal tilts Will's chin up by force, taps his thumb against Will's lower lip, and lets out a soft sigh. "I know you're angry," he murmurs. Placating. Like a therapist, like a parent. Will hisses at him. "You're allowed to be angry. Even fearful, if you need to be - I cannot control those emotions, yet."

He smiles, and drops his hand.

"It is the true gift of the submissive to be able to let all of that go. To place their trust and their love in the hands of their dominant and be taken care of." Will bares his teeth at him again, and Hannibal's lips twitch into another fond smile. "But of course, you know that already."

He steps away, to the table where Will's clothes sit. Will doesn't want to look at the implements lined up on the surface, doesn't want to know what's hidden in the body drawers and cabinets set into the far wall. He doesn't want to look, but finds himself helpless to resist, his eyes wide and fixed on Hannibal's back as he moves, prowling, towards them.

It occurs to him that there is one question - one of many, though this one strikes him the hardest - that is unequally answered between them. "Hannibal," he whispers, and sees the man's shoulders tense. He'll probably get hit if he keeps using Hannibal's first name. Good; if it pisses him off it's either death or release, and Will would take either. "What kind of dominant are you?"

Though he cannot see his face, he knows Hannibal is smiling. "Far from retired," comes the reply. "And more than capable of dealing with change. Now you'd best be quiet, Will; you already have several disobediences to make up for, and I would hate to damage you too much."

And there it is, the panic that he had refused himself earlier. It surges now, thick in his chest, a steady drip into lungs already straining.

Will doesn't bother with a glib remark about safewords, does not attempt to reason with Hannibal, but he cannot quite still his body. His feet slide on the cold floor, seeking purchase they will not find, unable to pull him from his space underneath the meat hook. He rises onto his toes and drops back down again, but can't even manage disappointment when that fails him.

"If you continue to wriggle like bait, I cannot speak for my aim." Hannibal warns him.

It has been suggested that a good dominant should experience any implement they wish to use on a submissive. Will has never been a good dominant. He looks away when Hannibal steps in front of him again, unwilling to let his mind work up whatever Hannibal is about to do, to twist it up into knots until it is inevitably so much worse than it needs to be.

Hannibal will not be reasoned with. He doesn't fit the typical pathology of a serial killer, and Will knows his face, his name, the contents of his home. If Will walks out of this basement, it will have to be under his own power.

But as Hannibal cups Will's chin, lifts his head so that their eyes meet, Will's sense of self-preservation drowns under the weight of his betrayal.

"Do you know why you're being punished?" Hannibal asks, and Will turns his face and *bites* him.

He manages to sink his teeth into the meat of Hannibal's thumb, digging in around a single piece of delicate skin hard enough that he feels a canine prick it, tastes the tang of blood between his teeth. Hannibal, to his credit, barely reacts - he does not jerk away and risk making the injury worse. His fingers tighten on Will's jaw, digging in hard to either side of his cheeks like convincing a dog to unlock. It hurts. It aches.

Hannibal's brows arch, and Will glares at him and licks the blood from the edges of his teeth. Hannibal's grip on him is strong, encasing all of his lower jaw now, and Will's fingers curl, clench into fists, as he struggles against his restraints and tries to pull away from it, to no avail.

Hannibal sighs, after a moment, and releases Will's jaw. He doesn't have a moment to react before his head snaps to one side, ears ringing and cheek blooming with sharp heat from the force of the slap. He gasps, and Hannibal reaches out and yanks him upright by the hair, twisting and wrenching his head back so it's a struggle to breathe.

"I'll ask you again," he says, calmly. Coldly. "Do you know why you're being punished?" Will sucks in a breath, winces, tongues the inside of his cheek to check for tears against his teeth. There aren't any, but there's the beginning of a tender welt and his cheekbone aches. "Come now, Will; punishing you without you knowing why is tantamount to beating a poor animal. Don't do either of us the discourtesy of pretending you're as simple as your dogs."

Will snarls, and bares his teeth to complete the picture. Hannibal waits, the very picture of patience.

"There's a thousand doms in Baltimore who would play sub for you," Will growls instead. "Go find one of those."

"They *are* as simple as your dogs, and more ill-bred. Don't play games with me, Will, you can't afford any more losses."

Hannibal's arm shifts in Will's peripheral vision, a quick jerk back and forward, and pain bursts sharp in a dozen pinpricks across the side of Will's thigh. Startling, yes, and unpleasant, but mild enough that Will recognizes it for the warning it is.

“Why are you being punished, Will?”

“Because you’re a psychopath on a power trip.” Will doesn’t know what spark of insanity loosens his tongue, but the words slip free before he can bite them back. He relishes them, even knowing what comes next.

Hannibal steps back, around, and this time the flogger cracks hard over his back, punching the breath from Will and nearly unbalancing him. He wouldn’t have far to fall, but he can already feel the dislocated shoulder that would likely result.

“Let’s start with your first infraction,” Hannibal says.

Will hisses out a breath, grits his teeth. Straightens, and shivers at the brushing lick of the flogger’s tails as they wrap around his thigh. The sting is less, but Will tenses all over, his back smarting and undoubtedly blooming in a splatter of red marks.

“First, being disrespectful. Not unforgivable, of course. You are, after all, still under the impression that your current state of being is your only one.” Will swallows, the stinging in his back reminding him to be quiet. His fingers are digging harsh crescents into his palms, his shoulders and arms ache. “Secondly, breaking my brandy glass. A bratty, juvenile attempt to rile me.” He sighs. “I’ll admit, you were somewhat successful.”

Will flinches when he hears the whistle of the flogger again, though the tails don’t do much more than lick at his thigh once more. Hannibal is *teasing* him, taunting him. Now that Will knows what kind of pain to expect, he’s anticipating it, on edge, sure that he’ll end up flogged and flayed to within an inch of his life.

“Next, biting me,” Hannibal says idly. “Did that bring you pleasure, Will? I would be more than happy to indulge your sadistic streak, if you have one.”

“Will you just fucking get on with it?” Will snaps. And instantly regrets it - not out of any guilt, snapping at the man he until recently called his friend, and not even for fear of retribution. He doesn’t like that he’s so shaken, so unable to keep a grip on his own tongue, his own voice. There’s a scream sitting in the bottom of his throat and each time Hannibal speaks, it rises up a little further, threatening to burst.

Hannibal laughs. It’s a low sound, hardly more than an expulsion of air. It makes the chill of the room feel almost pleasant, for the dreadful knot of anticipation that curls up in Will’s belly.

“That’s four,” Hannibal says. “I normally give my subs ten lashes for each infraction. I make them count. I wonder how many you’ll get to before you lose your voice.”

It’s a challenge. Pushing at Will’s defiant streak. The bigger they are, the harder they fall, and Will feels, cold and with absolute certainty, that Hannibal intends to see him shatter.

For a moment, defiance tugs at his tongue, batters the back of his teeth. Will swallows it whole and it curdles to disgust in his stomach.

The game is not Hannibal's. The game is *survival*. Hannibal can't leave him dangling from a hook forever. There will be other chances, other opportunities.

Tonight, there will most assuredly be blood, and Will's only hope is that he can minimize it.

"Do it, then," he says, muscles tensing as he braces himself, "Get it over with. *Chastise* me."

"So eager." Hannibal's voice is tinged with amusement, the way he sounds in his office, over talk of corpses and crime scenes. Will discards that thought before it can fishhook into his belly and rip him further. "Very well," Hannibal continues; "Let's see how well you learn."

The flogger comes down in a slash over Will's back, and he realizes with a choking, gasping horror that the previous strikes had all been mere play for Hannibal.

Will says nothing for a moment, cocooned in the echoing rush of his own heartbeat. Then he forces it out, sharp and furious. "One."

And it begins. Strike after strike over his back, his thighs. His legs wobble and his stomach quivers, and Will gasps out a dozen numbers before Hannibal manages to wring the first genuine cry from him.

"Four-. Fourteen," he stutters, gasping at the incessant sting that has collected itself, from the nape of his neck, all the way down his spine, flaring out like burning wings on his back and encasing his thighs. Hannibal hums, and Will winces as, instead of the flogger, Hannibal's hand runs down his back, from the center of his shoulders to his tailbone. It's a terrible kind of pain, striking every one of his vertebrae and taking shelter in his quivering lungs.

Hannibal huffs another not-laugh, and circles Will, holding out his hand so he can show Will the sheen of blood painted across his palm. "See this?" he asks, and Will wants to close his eyes and turn away. He's never heard Hannibal sound so *cruel*. "All perfectly avoidable. I'd advise you to remember that, in the future."

Then, he returns to Will's back. Another strike. Another. Will can't fight back the low noises of pain, no matter how much he tries. His knees shake, threatening to buckle, but every time he sags his restraints pull at his lungs, and he risks suffocating, so he has to force himself upright again.

By the time Hannibal gets to twenty-five, Will has lost his voice, and replaced it with tears. He can't help them; they well up and spill, thick and heavy, down his cheeks. His voice has gone to a whisper, because he doesn't dare stop counting now. By thirty, he feels the edges of his vision going grey. By the time the fortieth strike hits his thighs, he can feel, *hear*, blood dripping down him and landing in thick puddles on the floor. He heaves with sobs, wretched, raw, and tries his best to keep his breathing steady and his vision clear, but he knows he looks like a pathetic mess, and wonders if Hannibal flayed down to bone. He would believe it, knowing what he knows.

"That's better," Hannibal murmurs, and whether he's commenting on the notion of a task completed, or the aesthetic appreciation of Will's ripped-up back, or is simply pleased that

Will seems to have tamed his own tongue for now, Will cannot say. “Now that that ugly business is out of the way, we can begin training in earnest.”

Will blinks, his fingers giving a tired, disbelieving twitch. His mind is racing, roaring in his skull louder than the rush of blood in his ears. “That,” he rasps, snarling the words, “was a fucking *warmup*?”

Hannibal smiles. Will knows he’s smiling, though he cannot see him. “Careful, Will. Talk like that will earn you another ten lashes if you keep it up.”

Will’s jaw clamps shut, his teeth grinding together, loud in his emptied mind. Hannibal gives him a nod of approval, which is almost enough to get Will cursing again.

Sense and self-preservation outweigh ire and resistance. Will keeps himself still and quiet as Hannibal returns to the table to set the flogger aside.

“For a true submissive, obedience is instinct. Kneeling is a relief, pain is an aphrodisiac. There are some submissives who can hold the same bound position for hours without complaint. You made it less than five minutes before you began to shift.”

Because he’s not a submissive. Will doesn’t repeat himself. He is exhausted, and he aches, and there would be no point. Hannibal knows that. It’s part of the game for him.

“I want your obedience, Will, with or without your satisfaction, but I think you’ll find one easier with the other.” Hannibal steps behind him again, and a thick band of leather catches over Will’s throat, hauling him back and tearing his weakened breath away. Hannibal latches the collar just a hair too tight, and Will hears the sharp click of a padlock. A collaring is the least of the humiliations Will has borne so far, but the constant reminder constricting his throat makes it feel heavier than all the others.

“You can’t make it natural, Hannibal,” Will wheezes. “Not even if I try for you.”

Hannibal steps around him, still smiling, a man who has been gifted everything he wants on a silver platter. “You’ll find it’s in your best interests if I can.”

Chapter 2

To Will's surprise, Hannibal's next course of action seems to be not for the purpose of giving him pain, but to test his overall form, his reflexes, his instinctive responses to stimuli. Will remembers similar lectures - he's even given a few himself. Submissives respond differently to stressors. Their natural instinct, if their dominant is present, is to submit and respond with a conditioned surrender reflex. They can trust their dominant to take care of them, to keep them safe and remove or otherwise negate the danger. A sudden pain or startling event will cause them to freeze, if they are paired. Unpaired submissives are more likely to flee.

Dominants don't have the flight response. It is not in their nature to cower or shy away from displays of aggression, from pain, from frightening stimulus. So when Hannibal enters his field of vision, with something that looks dangerously close to a weapon, and the longer Will goes, dizzy and bleeding and floating in some awful, terrible entropy of sensation and anger, he lunges, teeth bared, fists clenched, legs tensed and ready to kick.

Hannibal tuts at him, when Will snarls at the feeling of sharp tines running down his flayed back. They're the kind of tool used to make patterns in pastry dough, but far too large and way too sharp for comfort, and Will feels like he's being stung by a thousand ants as Hannibal drags the tines down his spine. His shoulders roll up, his throat flexing in the too-tight collar, unable to swallow.

"You must learn to trust your dominant, Will," Hannibal tells him lightly. "I won't let anything happen to you."

"*You* are what's happening to me," Will hisses in response.

Hannibal hums, and taps the tined roller, sharp and hard, down Will's spine. Will's muscles tense, skin shining with sweat and blood, and he screams behind his teeth. Still, his feet are planted, because he can't see Hannibal and therefore trying to twist and attack him is useless. Hannibal is too quick, has too much of the upper ground.

Hannibal sighs, after a moment, and Will breathes out as he hears the tines get set down. "I think we will both feel better in the morning," he says gently, and gives Will a fond, reassuring smile. The same smile he would wear when telling Will to drive safely, or when he would greet Will at the door of his office. Violent, impotent anger rises in Will suddenly as a tidal wave, the bubble of it cresting, threatening to burst, to make him go nuclear.

"Am I going to sleep standing up?" he demands. "I'll suffocate."

Hannibal laughs, and shakes his head. "Although I think a little sleep deprivation would do wonders for your disposition, that is not my intention tonight." Will hisses at him, but remains silent, because his arms hurt and his wrists are sore and he'd honestly take sleeping in a Goddamn dog crate over standing up all night.

Hannibal's solution, as it turns out, is to tie both ends of a broad wooden board to the hook holding Will's arms up. He places the board at Will's back and, with a single pull of rope that

is both too well-practiced and too sudden for Will's liking, hoists him up. Will's whipped thighs and ass hit the board and he's hoisted to a relatively flat position, wrists still held up, but now with the board too, keeping the rest of his body elevated. It burns against his bruised and bloodied skin, and Will fight back a low groan of pain as Hannibal secures the ropes, fastens the counterweight, and appears above Will's head.

"Try not to fall off," he advises, and a gentle touch weaves through Will's hair. Will jerks his head, trying to fight him off, but can't get the leverage to really go for him. Hannibal gives him another small smile, and grabs the collar around Will's neck, wrapping another piece of rope beneath the padlock and tying it to the board. It's only wide enough to come to WIll's shoulders, so his head is forced back, hanging down, and he's already growing dizzy from blood. "If the board falls, you may snap your neck, which would be unfortunate. So I'd suggest you keep your movements to a minimum."

He gives Will one more cursory pat, and leaves. "Good night, Will."

Will snarls at him, but doesn't dare struggle as Hannibal ascends the stairs and the room goes black around him. "Hannibal!" he yells, his wrists flexing in his bindings, his throat itchy and chafing beneath the collar, his entire body tense and all too aware of how precarious his position is. "Hannibal!"

He hears a click, and a soft *whoosh*, and icy water splashes down on him from every angle in the room, an aggressive spray soaking immediately through him, down to what feels like his bones.

The room was cold to begin with. Soaked and deprived of light, it becomes arctic. Will shivers on the board, struggling to be still. It goes against everything in him telling him that the predator is gone, that *now* is the time to fight. The predator hasn't left. Hannibal floods every inch of this room. He may as well still be standing at Will's head.

In the morning, Hannibal will return with new challenges, new games to play. He'll set up hoops for Will to jump through, punish him for stumbling, and Will's body will need all the energy it can get to survive the onslaught.

Will closes his eyes, shudders when he sees no difference. No windows or cracks beneath doors to give his eyes something to adjust to. Just the void, cold and still as death, as if Will's life left the room when Hannibal did. The sticky black tar of Will's nightmares, in his nose and his mouth, choking him.

Now is not the time for a panic attack, nor is Will in the best of positions to have one. He's lightheaded from dangling, from four glasses of wine and one of brandy.

And at that thought, another pressing need makes itself known. Bloated and heavy, low in his stomach. Will groans. He tries, pointlessly, to fall asleep anyway.

Perhaps he does. One moment looks much the same as the next, shifting from open eyes to shut, his aches never abating. He has no idea what time it is, what time it *was*. When Hannibal rises and when he'll deign to begin Will's lessons. In a single moment, Hannibal has managed to make Will feel more crazy than he's ever felt on his own.

Sometime later, maybe hours, maybe minutes, the strain becomes too much to ignore. Will squeezes his thighs shut and it only worsens the pressure. It cannot possibly be any more humiliating than anything else he's been through in this night, but Will still shudders out a pained groan when his body gives out.

In the chill of the room, the initial burst is almost comically pleasant, hot against his thighs and trickling down his legs. It cools in seconds, though, and leaves Will with nothing but freezing mortification and the smell of himself, sour and stark in the sterile room.

In the morning, Hannibal will have something to say about it, some smart remark that will tug at Will's remaining dignity until the seams give out. The only blessing is that with the pressure gone, Will finally sleeps.

He wakes sputtering as another burst of ice washes over him. For a moment, he panics and thrashes, forgetting himself. Hannibal stills him with a hand in his soaked hair, tugging sharp and painful to bring Will back to the present.

"These things wouldn't be necessary if you learned to ask for help," Hannibal tells him. He looks put-together, refreshed, *pleased*, and Will wants to rend him to pieces.

He bares his teeth, and meets Hannibal's eyes, finding Hannibal looking down at him with that same infuriating fondness. His fingers card through Will's hair in a way Will is sure would be pleasant for a submissive, and then he moves away. Will tenses, trying to lift his head to see, but because of the chokehold around his throat, he can't do much more than lie still, panting, listening to the drips of water splash from his shivering body to the floor.

"This might be uncomfortable, but only for a moment," Hannibal says. Will frowns, and hisses as his frozen feet are taken in hands that feel way too big and far too warm, burning his frigid skin and making him twitch. Hannibal lifts and folds his legs tightly, heel to thigh, and binds them together in a series of figure-eights, around Will's lower legs, up behind his knees, over his thighs, so that they're bound tight together. Will tries with all his might not to make the comparison to a strung-up pig.

Then, Hannibal loops another piece of rope between his ankles, threads it through the meat hook holding Will's arms and the board up, and pulls forcefully. Will snarls as his feet are elevated, blood rushing to his head, his ass and lower back forced to peel from the board and he knows he stuck to it in places, he knows. He feels the scabs, wet with fresh water, peeling off like a blister.

It hurts, of course it hurts, and he's freezing and dizzy and can't do a fucking thing about it. He clenches his fists, glaring at Hannibal's chest when it comes into view, but can't lift his head to try and bite because of the damn collar around his throat. It's getting difficult to think with all the blood pouring into the back of his skull. He knows passing out isn't a total impossibility.

Hannibal smiles at Will, reaching for his throat. Will goes still, taking short, shallow breaths through his nose. If Hannibal puts any more pressure on his restricted and sore throat….

But instead, Hannibal snips through the rope holding the collar still. He reaches up and cuts through a few more restraints. The board falls away entirely, and for a moment, Will is in free fall, his arms suddenly unrestrained as his entire upper body swings back.

Hannibal's arms are there to catch him at the bottom of the arc, stilling him. Will dangles upside down from the hook, chest heaving with every startled breath. It had been too fast to scream, and then it was over, but the world still feels like it's spinning.

Hannibal's hands cups his cheeks, rubbing over ruddy skin. "I had hoped to save intimacy for a time when you would seek it out," he says, "but I'm afraid your training will need to be strict." And then, to Will's horror, he begins to undo his belt.

"No," Will says, shaking his head. "No, Hannibal, don't." He's embarrassed to hear his own voice pleading, pitched high to appease. Too many indignities, too much pain. Despite his best efforts, Will is scared.

"Shh." Hannibal's thumb finds the corner of Will's mouth and pries it open, forcing his way inside to rub over Will's palate, back to jam between the molars and force Will painfully wide. Will's protest comes out wordless and distressed.

"You must be starving," Hannibal says, rubbing gently over his teeth, slow over each ridge, as though counting. "If you're good, this will be over quickly, and you can have a treat. If you bite…." His thumb twists, hooks into Will's jaw and applies pressure until Will groans. "I will have to make sure it doesn't happen again."

Will's hands are still numb, still slowly regaining feeling from hours trapped, but he tries anyway to squirm, to push his arms against Hannibal's legs, desperate.

"Be still," Hannibal says, his voice deep and stern, "and open up. It's good for you, Will."

It's good for you.

Will has taught classes on the pathology of rapists and murderers. He's read the studies. The cautiously suggested theories on the effects of dominant sperm in reassuring and bonding with submissives. He thinks of weeks of bitter wine and wants to gag.

He's too predictable, he knows it, because he opens his mouth to protest, to yell, to say *something* in some last attempt to get Hannibal to stop and reconsider, and as soon as he does, Hannibal's cockhead is worked between his lips. It's hard to bite around the thumb in his mouth, he can crush and grind against the nail all he likes, but Hannibal's grip is too strong, his thumb too thick, for Will to connect his teeth anywhere else.

So he can only dangle there, helpless and dizzy and almost disturbingly numb in all the wrong places, and Hannibal cups the base of Will's skull with his other hand, holds him still, and forces his cock all the way into Will's mouth with a low grunt.

Will's throat protests immediately, unused to having something so large, and the angle makes him choke, muscles abused from screaming clamping down around Hannibal's cockhead. He can taste bitter precum, and it paints and batters the back of his throat, and he doesn't know

what to do with his tongue. He shoves at Hannibal in earnest, kicking weakly, trying to thrash and struggle, because even if he snaps the ropes and breaks his neck it'll be better than this.

Hannibal huffs, after a moment of Will's useless struggling, and Will almost wishes for a minute that he'd held his bladder better so that he could piss in the bastard's face when Hannibal gives him a small slap, and says; "Your technique is definitely lacking. Not to worry; you'll get enough practice in time."

The thought makes him gag, choking as Hannibal pulls back and then pushes further, so much of him filling Will, sealing his airways and rutting slow against Will's sore throat. As he pulls back, Will tries to suck in air too soon and ends up hacking, bile in his throat and the back of his mouth, teeth grinding against Hannibal's thumb.

"Always so much struggle," Hannibal muses, hooking his other thumb in parallel, giving him more leverage to pry Will open, drool gathering thick at the corners of his lips. "If you relax, it will be easier."

His hips roll forward again, and Will panics, still struggling to catch his breath. He flails, smacking the palms of his hands against Hannibal's knees, dizzy with the effort, with the blood pooling in his head, with Hannibal stealing oxygen from him in minute motions.

Teeth close around the skin of Will's soft cock, gentle, but with a clear threat. Will freezes in place and makes a noise somewhat akin to a horrified squeak. Hannibal tugs lightly and then grazes a kiss over the same spot.

"There we go," he says, the head of his cock rubbing lightly against Will's useless tongue. "Show the same treatment you expect to receive."

Tears gather in the corner of Will's eyes, and he tells himself it's from the constant test of his gag reflex. The alternative, that Hannibal has broken him to tears in so little time, is too awful to consider.

Hannibal pushes a little further each time. Will tries to go lax, to loosen his throat and let Hannibal get it over with. He's still choking the first time he feels wiry curls against his face, but Hannibal praises him anyway, a long slide of his warm hand down Will's freezing side. Heat in the form of a kiss finds Will's thigh, his hipbone, and, terrifyingly, the head of his cock. It lingers there, for a moment, and then Hannibal matches the roll of his hips with a slow, torturously warm swallow, drawing unwanted arousal to fill Will's cock in his mouth.

More tears fall, as Will's throat spasms around Hannibal's cock shoved deep into his mouth. Hannibal's lips on his own cock are almost unbearably soft, plush and warm, stinging his freezing and sensitive skin. He holds himself deep in Will's mouth, crushing his skull against his pubic bone with a widespread hand, and licks delicately at Will's cockhead, making his stomach tense and sink in, his breath hitch.

There aren't fingers in his mouth anymore, keeping him spread open, stopping him from biting. But Will can't bring himself to try - if Hannibal insists on keeping up this *quid pro quo* of acting out and punishment, Will can't afford to do something drastic with Hannibal's teeth so close to his cock.

His legs are still bound together tightly, he can't spread his thighs or roll his hips to try and angle his cock away from Hannibal's warm, wet mouth. And it feels good - Will can be the first to say the brain would rather experience pleasure than pain. As a result, the arousal in his stomach is building strength, emboldened by the rush of blood in his ears, his trembling lungs, the rough gasps he manages whenever Hannibal lets him get a catch of air.

He's half-hard, just from stimulation alone, his pain and his rapidly approaching state of delirious unconsciousness not letting him fully commit. Not that he wants to. The humiliation of it all, getting hard while he's collared and strung up like an animal and choking on cock, strikes him fiercely as a whiplash.

He sobs, as Hannibal hums, and sucks Will's cock into his mouth, tongue curling over his slit, around the frenulum, like he's savoring it. The word, the association with it, makes Will's stomach twist up sharply. *Savoring*, like meat.

He lets out a sound he doesn't want to call a whimper, and grips at Hannibal's calves as he starts to shake in earnest. The chafing on his ankles, all of his weight held by such delicate joints, the burn of rope down his legs, the sting of Hannibal's gentle mouth and the promise of those terrible teeth. The press of a warm hand to his flank, almost comforting. The grip in his hair and the tightness of the collar. The heaviness of foreign flesh in his mouth, it all combines and he falls under the weight of itself inside him, and he cups Hannibal's legs, slides to behind his knees, and forces himself to move his head.

Hannibal releases his cock, and Will hears him let out a stifled, surprised noise. Will hasn't done this for a while, and even when he had scened it was a cursory thing if his submissive needed it to get hard enough that Will only needed to fuck them for the briefest amount of time to get them to come. But Hannibal already commented on his lack of technique; it's not skill he's after from Will, right now. It's surrender. Compliance.

And if that's what it takes to get this over with, to get Hannibal to let him go and stop fucking *touching* him, then so be it.

It makes it worse, at first. If Will actually *tries* then so does Hannibal, mouthing at Will as if he thinks they're lovers, drawing slow passes of his tongue up and over the head.

Hannibal is still a man, though, no matter how infinite he feels with Will so helpless. He can only let Will take control for so long before sensation overwhelms him, before his fingers find Will's hair again, holding him still to try his throat again.

Everything aches, from the burn of rope against his bound thighs, all the way down to his heavy fingertips, and for a moment he hopes this is where it stops. That Hannibal will fuck the breath from his lungs, fill Will's throat until his vision fades, and that will be the end of it.

It isn't, of course, merely a prelude to the final act. "Swallow," Hannibal commands against his hip, his grip tightening, pulling rough at Will's scalp even as he swallows down the tip of his cock again.

Will knows what's coming and still chokes on it. Semen spills from the corners of his mouth even with Hannibal doing his best to flood his raw throat. Bile is creeping up again, but

there's nowhere for anything to go, no choice but obedience, frantic swallows around Hannibal's cock and prayers for breath or for death.

He can't swallow all of it, of course. The angle is all wrong, even he knows that, and his throat is so battered he can barely convince it to stay open. When Hannibal slips from his mouth, Will coughs violently, wiping weakly at his mouth as a heavy mess of come and bile spill from his lips, coating his cheeks, his jaw, clogging his nose and mixing with the tears stained on his cheeks and temples and soaking his hair.

And then, when he's still fighting for air and struggling to maintain consciousness, he feels Hannibal petting down his flanks, giving soft hushing sounds that Will imagines are meant to be soothing. He coughs again, choking on a wad of saliva in his flooded mouth, and tips his head back as far as he can with the collar around his throat to drool pathetically onto the floor.

"A capable first attempt," Hannibal tells him, and Will flinches as his hands are gathered again, and he's hauled up and his hands are reattached to the meat hook. He's held at a sharp curve, legs too straight and shaking, head hanging limply forward between his quivering arms, but at least now he can breathe easier and doesn't feel as dizzy. He heaves another deep lungful of air, flinching at the scent of come and bile, his own sweat, his own tears. He hates the tackiness of it all on his face, and wipes his cheek against his bicep.

Hannibal unbinds his legs, and catches Will as he unfolds, until he's poised precariously on his toes, his legs bound too tight for him to get a solid stance. Hannibal cups his chin, and lifts his face so their eyes meet, and Will hates that it's so hard to focus on him through the tears and the haze of new oxygen, finally allowed to breathe.

Hannibal smiles at him, like what he just did was a kindness, and Will freezes as he leans in and presses a gentle kiss to Will's forehead. The touch burns, and makes Will's stomach ache.

"I'll go get you something to eat," he promises, warm and low. Then, with a flash of humor that makes Will want to snarl, he adds, "Don't go anywhere."

—

The day starts like that every day, but what comes next always changes. Some days, Hannibal decides Will needs to be moved, and this never goes well.

"You should know that this isn't a punishment," Hannibal had said the first time, and then his hands had wrapped tight around Will's throat, thumbs pressing in over the flutter of his pulse, cutting off blood flow to the brain and sending Will struggling into darkness.

He likes to bind Will. Today, he binds him kneeling, ankles together, thighs and calves tied tight, knees forced wide apart with the aid of two loops installed in the floor. A third loop lashes to the collar, keeping Will in a tight bend, chest towards the ground, ass up.

"Kneeling is the most basic respect a submissive can show," Hannibal lectures, fingers dancing light over Will's shoulders, through the short hairs at the nape of his neck. "It's also a way for them to find the peace of subspace, the calm that comes with it.

Will thinks Hannibal's lost his mind. He can teach Will the motions, force his body to submit to whatever new game he's invented, but Will's not wired for subspace.

Hannibal keeps trying anyway.

"What practice would you like to try first today?" Hannibal asks, cupping Will's chin. His thumb tugs at Will's lip, and Will immediately drops his jaw to avoid the pain of Hannibal prying it open. "Oral or penetrative sex?"

Will thinks both of those sound pretty damn penetrative, but he understands what Hannibal means. He huffs, trying to swallow, though it's hard with his mouth hanging open. The taste of Hannibal's come, the memory of being so brutally used to the point where he'd almost passed out, it weighs heavy on him. He's reasonably certain it won't be as bad today, since at least he's upright and in no danger of falling over, but he knows better than to underestimate Hannibal. Will isn't the only one with a very capable imagination.

But the other option is…. His fingers curl into fists at the small of his back, where Hannibal had bound them comparatively loosely, wrist to opposite elbow. Loose enough to twist. He probably wants to see Will squirm. His shoulders already ache, and the ropes burn against the welts still-healing on his back.

Hannibal's head tilts, and he lifts his brows, tapping Will's cheek. "If you don't want to decide, I will decide for you," he says after a moment, "but I think you and I both know that it's more pleasant for the submissive to know what's coming." He adds, after a small smile, like they're sharing an inside joke; "In most cases."

Will's upper lip twitches, but he fights the urge to make a sound; some challenging thing that will undoubtedly earn him another set of lashes for an infraction. He swallows, and Hannibal gives him another expectant look.

"Three," Hannibal murmurs. Will blinks, frowning. Hannibal's *counting*? "Two…."

"Oral!" Will yelps, cluing in at the literal last second. Hannibal smiles, gently brushing Will's hair from his eyes. A reward for good behavior, Will thinks bitterly. His nose has itched for days.

Instead of unbuckling his slacks, Hannibal turns to rummage through a cabinet. Will strains against the collar, twisting his neck painfully to look. He's chosen wrong, somehow, though he can't think of how he could have possibly chosen right.

The object Hannibal kneels to present him is black, bulbous, with two ominous straps dangling from it. Will already knows the purpose, and he swallows thickly, ducking his head until Hannibal grabs his hair to force it back up.

At least it's small, he assures himself, as Hannibal buckles the gag into his mouth. Unpleasant, but not terrible, not so hard to ease into.

Then Hannibal connects the second piece he'd been concealing. Two pumps, and the gag still rests comfortably on his tongue, but now it presses at his palate, too, and Will knows there is

so much more to come.

“I thought it best to try you on something you could keep for long periods of time,” Hannibal tells him. “Ideally, your body would respond with arousal, but my expectations for your first few tries are very low.

Two more pumps. The gag nudges at the back of Will’s throat. He tries not to make a sound, not to give Hannibal the satisfaction of his distress.

The dildo itself, even before it began to inflate, had the same stubborn tension of a tire. Will knows, even if his throat muscles hadn’t been so horrendously abused, he wouldn’t be able to crush air out of it on his own. So, too, the pressure between the roof of his mouth and his tongue, the edges of his teeth sawing away until his jaw aches, does nothing to dissuade the damn thing from filling his mouth to the point where it hurts to try and swallow, his gag reflex teased at like a promise.

He doesn’t like to think about Hannibal making him do this more than once. He just…. He can’t fake it. He can’t *fake* submission, because there’s only so far faking takes him, and Hannibal has a proven pattern of escalation. The alternative of continuing to fight is impossible. He’s under seige in his own body and there is no help on the way.

Hannibal grips his chin, drawing Will’s attention, and Will winces and closes his eyes, trying to lower his head because when Hannibal makes him lift it, the dildo slides a little farther back and makes him gag. His chest heaves, shoulders tensed up, and there’s not a damn thing he can do about it but try to breathe.

Hannibal forces his chin back up, running his knuckles over Will’s Adam’s apple, gently encouraging his frantic, choking swallow. “It will get easier,” he promises while Will tries not to *suffocate* on his own spit. “Eventually, you’ll look forward to it.”

Will is sure his skepticism shows even through watery eyes, but Hannibal finally lets him drop his chin. The attachment is still dangling from the gag, and Will stares numbly down at it as Hannibal moves around him.

“The most important part of your training is not obedience,” Hannibal says from somewhere behind him. “It is teaching you to associate these things with pleasure.”

‘Pleasure’, in Hannibal’s mind, apparently begins with a slick finger nudging at him. Will jerks against the ropes that hold him, pulls startled at the collar. The leather rubs raw at the nape of his neck. There had been no warning, no horrific little monologue. Just the finger, and now a hand at the base of his spine, holding him steady.

“Fear twists the mind. It can make strangers out of friends, create monsters in the shadows beneath our bed. Pain can be an excellent learning tool, but it needn’t be part of this training, if you can learn to relax.”

It’s not the first time Hannibal has said it, but it’s the first time he’s said it while knuckle-deep in Will’s body, easing his way in past resistance, and yes, past fear. Ignoring the way Will twitches and shakes with every nudge further.

Will clenches his jaw, wrists yanking at the ropes keeping them bound to his back, chafing the welts as Hannibal holds him with perfect precision, splitting him open. He pushes at the dildo in his mouth with his tongue, trying to work it free, to no avail. All it does is make him forget to swallow, and choke on his own saliva.

Don't touch me, don't fucking touch me. Of course, he can't say it. And Hannibal is adding a second finger, the burn of Will's untried rim stretching causing another series of shivers to run up his spine.

And then, Hannibal's hand *twists*, and his fingers brush a point inside Will that sends an unwelcome pulse of heat through him. His breath catches, lungs seizing, and he chokes all over again. It's not a moan, he'll be damned if he moans because of that, but Hannibal lets out a quiet, smug noise, and pets over the spot again. Another wave of heat bursts through Will's stomach, wider and gentler than the burn of a whip and flogger, stings him like cold.

To his horror, he can feel himself responding. Tears well in his eyes and he jerks his head sharply, shaking it, clinging helplessly to the impotent anger roaring in his chest, but Hannibal is a doctor and a keen study of the human body, and knows just how to play Will like any instrument, knows just what touches will pick him apart and rip him to shreds.

Hannibal shushes him, and slides a hand up Will's back, over his bound arms, over the collar, and into his hair. A memory flickers in Will, of doing the same - a submissive woman he'd picked up on a night that got a little too lonely, too swamped in her haughtiness to enjoy her as a person. He'd wanted to see her bend, and break. Wanted to see the proud woman scream and cry as he held her face down and fingered her until she was too sensitive to speak.

Comparing himself to that woman leaves a bitter taste in his mouth. Hannibal sees him as haughty. As arrogant, defiant. Something to be broken and remolded. Imperfect, a cracked statue with spiderweb patterns out of place. And he knows he won't be as lucky as she was, discarded with a tender throb between her legs and a vague sense of physical satisfaction with the emotional ache of an inattentive dominant. He won't be discarded, except as leftovers down the garbage disposal.

Hannibal touches him like a lover. Not with the casual ownership he has displayed up until this point, but with gentle searching, seeking out nerve endings down Will's back that bring comfort. Arousal builds in a slow simmer, Will's cock thickening between his thighs. He hasn't been given enough leverage to press his thighs together and hide his responses, but Hannibal is entirely uninterested in anything but the task before him.

He waits until Will's body undoes itself. When the strain of fighting outweighs the mortification of giving in, Will goes limp. It changes nothing of his position, bound as tight as he is, but when Hannibal tries a third finger, Will cannot make himself fight it. He knows there's no point. He knows Hannibal will carve out a place inside Will whether Will wants him there or not. It could hurt, could rip him open and leave him bleeding. Will tells himself it's better to bide his time. There will be another moment, another chance, and he will want to be in one piece when it comes.

He's beginning to lose track of how many times he's told himself that.

“There are dominants who enjoy penetration, of course, but there is a certain submission to be found in welcoming another into your body. Allowing them to mold you to suit their purposes.” Hannibal’s fingers slip out of him. Will huffs out a breath through his nose, feeling uncomfortably raw, open, his body seeking fulfillment it’s begun to expect. Hannibal does not leave it wanting long, pressing something thin and cool against Will as he continues. “When that moment comes for us, Will, I want you to be as comfortable as possible. No fears or worries in our connection.”

Connection. Will’s mind hisses the word. It hurts to try and keep his head up, his shoulders tense, so he drops his forehead to the cool floor and sighs when his flushed, sweaty skin leaves a streak across it. The dildo Hannibal is forcing inside him is not particularly large, no more of a stretch than three of his fingers had been, but it’s bulbed and gives Will the sensation of opening and closing, like a large swallow.

He grits his teeth around the base of the dildo in his mouth and tries to breathe as it hits his prostate. Another wave of promising heat surges up his back, makes his nostrils flare and his teeth ache. Stifled though he is, he’s sure Hannibal hears him moan.

He receives a gentle pat to his bound wrists, Hannibal’s fingers spreading over his fist like he expects Will to open his fingers and allow them to lace. Will refuses, and Hannibal hums, instead wrapping his fingers around the ropes crisscrossed up Will’s forearms, gives a gentle tug that makes the collar pull tight around his neck and his entire body sway back into the press of the dildo.

“Our bodies want to feel pleasure, Will,” he says, in that same soft, matter of fact tone, like he’s giving a lecture. Still, it is very obviously gentle, affectionate. Will can’t do anything but grunt feebly in response. “It is why we evolved this way, so that we could experience new heights with each other.”

Connection, evolution. Hannibal makes it all sound so inevitable. Will clenches his eyes tightly shut and wonders, if he jerked his head hard enough, he could make himself pass out by hitting his head against the floor or choking himself on the collar until he lost consciousness.

“Everything we do together will be strange and difficult for you, but the more you enjoy it, the easier it will become.” Hannibal’s hand slides up Will’s spine, his fingers tugging at the collar, just once, as if checking. When this is over - if it’s ever over - Will knows he’ll bear a scar, a red discoloration where he’s tugged with every shudder.

“And I’m more than happy to help you,” Hannibal says, and Will is almost *embarrassed* by his shock when the vibrations begin.

Of course it was a vibrator, aimed so carefully inside him. Just a low thrum for now, but even that was more than Will had ever felt, more than he’d ever wanted. He huffs a plea, chokes himself on collar and rubber to groan out his complaint. His thighs tremble, the skin held by the ropes white from pressure.

Through it, Hannibal pets him, counts every bump in Will’s spine with the palm of his hand. He hums the sort of wordless comforts any dominant would, shushes Will so gently that Will

wants to scream.

The next level up makes Will's toes curl, more frustration than pleasure, but plenty of both. It seeps up through his body, steadily overwhelming his resistance, his sense of himself. Hannibal twists and pushes, and Will draws deep breaths in through his nose and tries to cut himself off from it. Dissociation used to come easily to him.

It doesn't help him now. What he would give for something, *anything* to distract him. Hell, he'd take blood and viscera if he had to, but even trying gives him the prickly sensation of helplessness. He used to empathize with the killers - now, it's far too easy to take the mantle of victim, and that stings worse than Hannibal's awful affection.

Hannibal hums, after a while, and flicks up the setting again. Will chokes on the dildo in his mouth, and then again when Hannibal's hand dips below his stomach, taking his cock in hand. Mortified, Will knows he's hard and leaking, flushed and ready for his body to throw itself over the freefall. The pit is yawning at him, mouth open wide, ready to devour.

He whimpers, and Hannibal takes the base of the vibrator, angles it up high to both stretch Will's rim and give brutal sensation right to his prostate. It rolls it in sweeping little curls, like there's a finger rubbing over it, too much, too much -. And his hand around Will's cock is tight and warm and feels far too good. Will's toes curl, his fists clench, and he knows he's going to come.

A single, helpless snarl is all he manages, a 'No' and a 'Stop' and an 'I'll fucking kill you' all mixed into one as he seizes, lower back cramping so hard it aches, ass clenched down around the toy as Hannibal stills it, keeps it pressed tight and trembling. Will hears his own come splash against the floor, feels it drip and hit his knees, there's so much. It goes and goes, on and on, and Hannibal strokes him through it, still making those little shushing noises that make Will want to rip out his tongue.

Then, it's over, and Will can't help the way he goes lax, a pitiful whine stuck behind his teeth. He presses his forehead to the floor and floats on waves of unwelcome release, almost blissful. Almost like falling asleep.

Hannibal removes the toy, still vibrating, and releases Will's cock. He rubs his messy hand over Will's stomach in a soothing petting motion, and Will blinks when his chin is caught. Still with that messy hand, the scent of his own come sharp and sour in his nose.

Hannibal smiles, and Will closes his eyes, drops his head limp into Hannibal's hold because his neck and throat hurts too much and when he lifts his head the dildo chokes him. He hears a soft hum of approval, feels lips against his sweaty hair, and slowly uncurls his aching fingers from their tight fists.

"There we go," Hannibal says, and Will wants to snap at him. Exhaustion and submission are not the same thing. He can't speak. Can't even open his eyes. Hannibal brushes his fingers over Will's hole, and Will tenses up and tries to clamp down to force him away, but Hannibal doesn't penetrate him. Just...pets him. Like a favored pet.

Will's stomach is sour and heavy with revulsion, but it hurts too much to toss his head or fight it, so he doesn't.

Will's body aches less in the aftermath. It's chemical, he knows, the expected response to an orgasm. He still resents it. He resents the way the ropes burn so much less when he's limp. The way everything in him is screaming 'just let it happen if it means the ache will stop.'

This time, Hannibal's hands are almost gentle as they settle over his throat. Will sinks into darkness with relief, free for a moment from the twisting migraine of survival versus resistance.

—

Will keeps count of the days at first, but without any sort of window, he can't even be sure they *are* days. It would be like Hannibal to completely twist Will's sense of time into knots. He was certainly unconscious often enough.

They blur. Sometimes Will struggles to remember if a certain aspect of his training had been a week ago or just the day before. Sometimes he thinks himself in circles trying to find some sort of pattern or schedule in Hannibal's lessons. There's nothing else to think about.

Today is pain. Will is beginning to do 'well' in certain areas. He gets hard now when Hannibal binds him on his knees, and Hannibal's pleasure is so thick in the air Will can almost feel it himself.

Pain, though, pain Will is bad at.

He has tried to tell Hannibal it's not his fault, he's tried explaining that he doesn't have the right dynamic for masochism, but things go much better for him if he just grits his teeth and bears it.

Hannibal's hand is not so bad. Preferable, actually, because Hannibal will stop between strikes to rub and soothe, chasing away the sting with a warm palm. Will has been struggling with the paddle. It leaves deep seated bruises that Will feels even when he can't move.

Today when Hannibal binds him bent over a table, he tells Will they're going to try something new.

His legs are shaking, and it's hard to breathe between the collar and the unyielding surface of the table, and his mind is reeling with possibilities. He's sure Hannibal has a nauseating amount of implements to choose from, and Will may never see them all. Not if he's good.

Hannibal sighs, behind him, and brushes a hand over Will's thighs. They still bear welts from the flogger, little stinging scabs that Will hesitates to pick at lest they scar. Hannibal rubs his hand, annoyingly gently, up until he comes to a rest at Will's tailbone, as if he needs to hold him down. As if Will could go anywhere.

"Count for me," he reminds Will. Will learned that lesson early.

He hears it before he feels it. A sharp whistle through the air, an almost surprisingly light *swat*, followed by searing pain. He hisses through his teeth, clenching his eyes tightly shut. “One.”

A crop. A Goddamn fucking riding crop.

Hannibal hits him again, a neat, inch-long point just below the first. “Two,” he rasps. He rises to his toes, and Hannibal forces him back down in preparation for the third hit. It comes, at least Hannibal is being somewhat consistent today, sticking to a rhythm. “Three.”

The steady pace helps him anticipate it. Helps him ease into it. Still, he starts to sweat, shaking, because he doesn’t know how many times Hannibal intends to hit him. He doesn’t tell Will every infraction - expects Will to just know them, at this point. Will wonders if sometimes he breaks the rules just by existing.

Another hit. “Four.” Another. “Five.” Will’s breath is unsteady, now, the rocks of his body doing nothing to center him. Tears of reflexive pain sting at his eyes. Hannibal likes making him cry - maybe it means he feels better soothing them away, after. Some perverted form of aftercare to sate the nurturing spirit Will knows he has.

By the time they get to ten, Will’s ass stings awfully, and the pressure of Hannibal’s hand on his back feels like coals, sinking into his spine, heating him up all the way to his head. He drops his shoulders, groaning as Hannibal hits him again and Will manages to croak out an “Eleven.”

“Good, Will,” Hannibal murmurs. His fingers tap lightly on Will’s back. “Very good. You’re taking this so well.”

Will wants to take a chunk of him out with his teeth, to see how well *he* can take it.

He wants, more than that, to just get it right for once. To not have disobedience taken out on his flesh, or, more impossibly, to find the arousal in it Hannibal keeps promising him. After all this, after what must be weeks of pain and struggle, Will just wants it to be over. If that means Hannibal wins, Will doesn’t care. He wants to sleep in a bed. He wants to look out a window. He wants to feel less guilty when Hannibal has to discipline him.

At twenty-one, when Will realizes it *still* isn’t over, he screams. Not pain, but anger. Anger, frustration, humiliation.

“Just *stop*. Can’t you just fucking stop for one goddamn day?”

Hannibal stops. He rests the leather tongue of the crop over Will’s tailbone, a warning more thorough than any he could give aloud.

“We’ve discussed your language, Will.”

“Fuck your discussions,” Will spits. Regret is already coiling in his belly. He wants to undo it. Take his punishment so he can receive the comfort that comes at the end.

But it's too late now. He's ruined it. There will be no appeasing Hannibal tonight, no praise or pets for good behavior.

If Will is going to suffer tonight, he might as well do it thoroughly.

"Fuck you too," he adds. "Fuck you and this entire fucked up game of yours."

Hannibal sighs. "You were doing so well."

Will expects to be hit again, to be beaten until his bones collapse and his lungs cave in, until he's nothing more than a pile of pulp and viscera and a gleaming monument to Hannibal's anger. To God's wrath, reigning down upon him. He expects Hannibal to force a toy into him dry, another vibrator or something big and hefty or maybe even his fingers again, stretching Will wide. His fist, a Goddamn wine bottle, Will doesn't know.

So the shock is almost so violent it stings when Hannibal, after a moment, takes the crop from Will's back, and sets it down on the table. He circles it, expression unreadable through Will's tears, and unbinds his hands. He hauls Will upright and threads a finger through the padlock tight enough to choke him and white out his vision, and when Will blinks aware again, he's being hung up at the meat hook once more.

Hannibal is behind him, so Will can't see his face. His legs are unsteady, his ass stings, his shoulders ache.

Hannibal's fingers trail, feather-light and soft as sin, up his flanks, and he heaves another sigh. Will closes his eyes, bows his head. Of course - Hannibal would kill him here. It's cleaner here.

He almost doesn't register the loosening of the collar, can't, until he sucks in a breath and can swallow without pain. His skin is dry and chafed beneath where the collar rested, flushing too-hot immediately with renewed blood flow so that it feels like Hannibal is trying to cut off his head with a burning wire.

But there's no pain. There isn't much of anything except what lingers.

Hannibal's lips, warm and soft, touch his shoulder, and he says, so quietly it's almost like a threat all on its own; "I'll see you in the morning."

Then, he leaves, and plunges Will into darkness. And finally, maybe because the collar is gone, maybe because Will has no *fucking* idea how to process what just happened, maybe because it would feel nice to hear a noise he could control for once, he screams. He thrashes, and yells, and screams. Not for help, not to taunt Hannibal further. He yells and cries just because he can, and then, like air deflating from a tire, he goes silent, breathing hard.

His fingers curl, bound by the rope. Not uncomfortable, not cutting. His feet are cold.

He closes his eyes, and sighs.

He thinks he could sleep like this. Let pain and exhaustion take him over, hang limp and tired until morning.

He doesn't know when morning is. He doesn't know much of anything anymore, except the basement and Hannibal. Sometimes, when Hannibal has Will practicing positions for hours at a time, Will goes through old cases in his head. More and more, lately, that has faded out into a strange numbness, his mind going blank, shutting down, isolating him from himself, from everything but the position and Hannibal's hands on him. It goes faster, that way. Hurts less.

Will's arms begin to cramp first. He would have expected his forearms, his wrists, but the first twinge of pain comes to his triceps.

Will pushes up onto his toes, testing his limits. He can't stay like that for long, and this time, his wrists *do* twinge when he's back on his feet.

Sleep is impossible. After a while, dissociation and distraction are both impossible too. The ache spreads. His shoulders and wrists take the brunt of it, responsible for supporting the rest of his body when he tires too much, but his legs are not far behind.

Hours pass. He thinks. Will tries to count the seconds and give himself some sort of benchmark. That only makes each moment seem insurmountably longer.

Hannibal doesn't return.

Will screams again, hurls slurs towards the ceiling, jerks at the ropes as though this time, *this time*, they'll give out.

Still nothing, no voice deriding his attitude, no crack of light from the stairs.

It must be morning by now, has to be, but the dark creeps into Will, crawling into his ears and his nose like bugs, thick in his senses. There is nothing here but Will. There may not even be a room anymore. Nothing but darkness and the trappings of his own mind. With Hannibal so thoroughly exhausting him, he'd forgotten what that was like.

The shadows have claws. They always have. Will sinks and sinks into blackness, into fangs and empty bellies. The pieces of Will Graham begin to scatter to the winds. He aches, he aches, the world is gone and the end is nothing, and everything hurts.

There is the darkness and then there is him, but his edges are blurring, he can't even make out the darker-than-dark shadows of the table. He knows it's there, he *knows* it is, but it's not. His senses have failed him before and they're failing him now. The echo of his own voice taunts him, acoustics far too good. He's surrounded by versions of himself that don't exist and never have existed and never will exist and all of them are taunting him, jeering at him.

They're free. They could be free. They're not trapped here like he is. He's a thousand different places and none all at once, and everything hurts, and he just wants *something*. Just. Light. Fresh air. A breeze that tells him there's something else in here with him. Will has never minded being alone, he *likes* being alone, but there's being on his own and there's being here, and the floor is starting to feel less and less real.

It will collapse, like he can feel the walls of his mind collapsing, helpless against such relentless, complete darkness. If Hannibal is moving above him, Will cannot tell. There is no

creak of floorboards, no scents of food. Nothing. Nothing but Will and the empty chasm of space and time and he's going to die, here. He's going to fucking die.

Breath comes to him like something automatic, forced by a machine. His heart feels too slow, dizzying him with every pulse. He can feel it everywhere, from his fingertips to his toes, bursting in his ears. He thinks he might be bleeding, somewhere, or maybe that's his sweat, or maybe it's tears, or maybe it's nothing at all.

How can nothing feel like so much? Even his head, in time, clears away, like floodwaters finding their way to the ocean. He is blank, and empty, and aches. He imagines the feeling is like clay pots in a furnace, freshly exposed to the real world.

Chapter 3

The light, when it comes, is startling. It floods every corner, scalds Will's senses. He goes, in an instant, from nothing to everything. To feet on the floor, arms in the air. Red vision from squeezing his eyes shut tight, light seeping through even then.

Every nerve ending comes alive at once. Every piece of himself that had begun to break, to shatter. His senses are overwhelmed. He thinks, for a moment, that the noise needs to stop, and then realizes that it's him. It's sobbing, gasping. Wordless agony, drowning him in a desperate need. Please, oh god, please….

Words come, thick over his tongue, clumsy and blurred. Please please please don't make him go back don't leave him alone again he's sorry he's sorry he wants to be good sorry sorry sorry don't put him back into the void.

Will's hands are fully freed for the first time in weeks. He doesn't notice that, or how badly his wrists bleed from frantic, mindless yanking at the ropes. He doesn't notice that his legs give out and he sinks fast towards the floor. He notices only the weight at his back, the arms around his waist, the voice against his ear.

"I've caught you, Will. It's alright. You're safe with me."

Safe. Safety is such a foreign concept, so far from the reality he's lived.

But Hannibal. Hannibal's rules are clear, his discipline and training both thoroughly explained. There's a way to win. A way to be right, to be *good.* To follow the rules and avoid the darkness swallowing him up.

Will reaches back with trembling hands and catches a fistful of Hannibal's sweater. It's soft. It's the softest thing Will's touched in a long time. He clings to it, gasping for breath, turning when Hannibal allows him to press his entire face into the gentle wool.

"Let me stay," Will gasps. "Don't put me back there. I'll be so good for you. I'll fix it. I'll fix me."

A hand goes to his hair, so gentle and soothing Will chokes on his own saliva as he sobs. He's sure he's making a mess of Hannibal's fine clothes, but Hannibal seems delighted by it. Will feels a tug on his hair, and looks up, obeying the silent command.

"My dear Will," Hannibal sighs, cupping his face. "You were never broken, darling. But even the caterpillar must go through a trial to emerge in its final form. What it was always meant to be." Will's lashes flutter as his cheekbone is pet, and swallows. Yes, yes, that makes perfect sense. It all makes sense, eases the reverberation of questions and emptiness in Will's chest.

He feels another gentle brush on his neck, and looks down, to see the collar Hannibal gave him before. He swallows, touching his own neck, which still feels so sore, but in the way skin

burns in an ice storm. He wants to feel warm, here. He wants weight and pressure and -.

“Would you like this back on?” Hannibal asks. Like there was ever a choice. Of course he does.

Will nods, closing his eyes, and sighs in relief as it’s wrapped around his throat again. As the padlock closes with a resounding *click*. It’s not too tight, it’s perfect, and the hot sting of his tears is soothed by Hannibal’s fingers, and his lips press gentle to Will’s forehead with another quiet hum.

“There’s my perfect boy,” he whispers, and Will nods again. He settles on his knees, feeling sensation return by increments. Toes, curling, because that’s what they do with pleasure and Hannibal’s kiss, his collar, feels good. Knees aching - it’s good to be on his knees. Hands, limply clasped in his lap. Not to hide, but ready, for rope or cuffs or the circle of Hannibal’s fingers to hold him still. To serve.

Hannibal’s smile feels like a physical touch, a warm pulse of heat all the way down his back that makes him arch. Hannibal stands, and Will aches with relief when he’s commanded to as well. He rises, and bows his head, and Hannibal smiles at him, and it’s his hands that go around Will’s wrists. Not rope. And not around his neck. Will can’t remember the last time he breathed this easily.

“I have a surprise for you. A treat, for taking your lessons so well.”

Will’s heart stutters and stalls and starts again. He’s had praise and punishments. He’s had a gentle hand in his hair. He’s had the most intense orgasms of his life, and he’s had ones that were wrung from him bit by bit while he cried.

He hasn’t had a ‘treat’, and he suddenly finds that he wants it, he wants it more than anything, because anything at all has to be better than fighting himself. Fighting Hannibal.

Hannibal’s fingers trace gently over Will’s throat, the pulse point beneath his jaw. Will tilts his head back and closes his eyes, waiting for the pressure.

“No,” Hannibal says. “I think you can move yourself this time, don’t you?”

Will’s so helplessly pleased that he nearly trips over himself following Hannibal up the stairs.

It’s too bright upstairs, too distracting with a million colors to look at. Will was right: it isn’t actually morning. He can see a glimpse of moonlight through a window. He resists going to it; he won’t give Hannibal a reason to take this all away.

Hannibal’s bedroom is all dark woods and deep blues. It’s relaxing to look at after nothing but bright, crisp, hospital-clean basement. Will sinks into the bed when he’s bade there, crawling back towards the headboard as Hannibal crawls over him.

They’ve been practicing. Will knows he’s ready, he could spread his thighs now and Hannibal would fit so easily between them. He knows it won’t hurt, it doesn’t have to if he’s good. He can’t figure out why his hands are shaking.

Hannibal kisses the inside of each of Will's wrists in turn before he binds them to the bed, soft cuffs that don't tug too badly at the rope burns. They are leather, fur-lined on the inside, and the bedspread beneath him feels like the most decadent and luxurious thing Will has ever touched. He sighs, happy just to be, warm to the touch.

Hannibal's hands are gentle on his flanks, under his hips. He tightens his grip and Will lifts, and then his hands slide to the backs of Will's knees, folding him, and Will is so eager, so happy to go. He gasps as his knees touch his chest, and after so many times being bound in positions much more uncomfortable than this one, it's easy to convince his shaking thighs to hold, open and pliant.

Hannibal looms over him like a beast, all teeth in his smile, his eyes black in the comparative darkness. Will wets his lips, and whimpers when Hannibal forces himself between his thighs, leans down and presses his lips to Will's forehead again. He's quickly becoming addicted to it, to Hannibal's scent clogging his throat, to the heat that spreads out all down his neck and pools behind the collar from such a simple, affectionate gesture.

"Beautiful," Hannibal breathes, and Will knows he's covered in tears and blood and his own sweat, he's dirty, he's beaten, but Hannibal can wipe that all away. The way he says the word makes Will want to believe it.

"Please," he whispers. Hannibal has never hurt him for asking, the few times Will begged when it wasn't for freedom or a malicious barb aimed to make Hannibal mad. He blinks up, as their foreheads rest together, and his wrists twist in the cuffs. Not to get away, but because he wants to touch.

"Soon, my dear boy, I promise," Hannibal replies, soothing and calm as ever. His hands skate down Will's thighs, and then go to his own clothes. Will's breath hitches, and he looks down with wide eyes to where he can see Hannibal's cock tenting his expensive suit pants.

Hannibal's head tilts. "If you can be patient," he says gently, "then I can undress to make love to you properly."

Will swallows. He thinks he might die if he has to wait any longer. But, and he feels the heavy truth of it when he answers, he says; "I don't want to mess up your clothes." Hannibal blinks, a surprised and delighted gleam in his eye. "I'm all dirty."

Hannibal breathes out, heavily, and gives an acquiescing nod, rising from the bed. "Next time, then," he promises. "After you've had a bath. There will be plenty of times in the future, I'm sure, when I cannot help myself but…" He smiles. "You've been very patient, and deserve to see me as clearly as I see you."

Hannibal slips off one layer at a time, as careful with his clothes as he was when he bound Will. They used to be about the same size, but Will feels so much smaller now. Starved, and beaten, he is but fine filigree and stained glass, and Hannibal is a monument of stone.

He was half-hard from the moment he climbed into the bed, but anticipation wets Will's mouth as Hannibal breaks down the barriers between them. Will knows what comes next, if he's good, and he's trying so hard to be good.

“I want nothing between us,” Hannibal says when he climbs back between Will’s shaking legs. “I want to feel as much of you as possible. Your pleasure and your pain.”

Will whimpers and closes his eyes, waiting. He’s had everything Hannibal could give him, rough and soft and wet and dry. He’s learned to find pleasure in all of them, to come even in tears. His erection doesn’t falter, even when he hears Hannibal spit into his own palm.

“Look at me, Will.”

Will looks.

Hannibal is so close, a breath away, a heartbeat of space between one body and the next, and then not even that. He carves his way into Will, brings them together into one body, and even the burn cannot stop Will from trying to reach for him.

Hannibal hushes another sound, nuzzling against Will’s cheek. “Deep breaths. You remember how to do this. Let me into you, Will. Make room for me.”

One shaking breath in and another out. Will’s thighs ache from holding them up, but he won’t move them now, not when he’s so close to pleasing Hannibal, not when he’s finally getting a treat for working so hard. Little by little, he makes his body relax, feeling Hannibal sink slowly deeper, until there cannot possibly be anywhere else for him to go.

The weight of Hannibal helps him keep his legs up, and Will sobs a formless word of thanks as he’s pressed down to the bed by gentle, loving hands. Hannibal’s breath is warm on his neck, warm over the collar, and Will tilts his head to show more of his throat, sighing as Hannibal’s touch skates down his flanks, to his ass, lifting him just a little more, making him curl just a little tighter. And then Will feels Hannibal’s thighs touch him, shaking just as hard - with restraint, with satisfaction, Will can’t tell.

His hands twist in the cuffs, wanting to reach, and he shivers when Hannibal bares his teeth against his neck. He wants them inside him. He wants all of Hannibal inside him; cock and nails and jaws locked tight around his flesh.

Hannibal doesn’t hesitate, merely takes another moment to relish how Will tightens in spasm around him, rhythmic, trained to coax whatever is inside him deeper, and then he plants his hands to the backs of Will’s knees, rears over him, and gives Will his first, solid, brutal thrust.

Will cries out, arching as much as his body will allow, nodding wordlessly. Words escape him, everything escapes him. He’s empty, a fragile little clay pot, and needs to be filled. He wants to be filled. Hannibal feels so fucking *good*.

“Please,” he gasps, insensate, too sensitive. Overwhelmed and empty and aching. Hannibal’s upper lip twitches, lashes low in pleasure, jaw clenching. Will wants to be good, wants Hannibal to know he’s trying, wants Hannibal to be pleased with him. He took so much time to get Will here and Will wants him to think it was worth it. “Please, Hannibal -.”

The next thrust stalls his words in his throat, strangled by a moan, and Will tips his head back. He doesn’t have to think, doesn’t have to anticipate and react like a prey animal backed

into a corner. He just has to feel, to let go, and he can do that. The darkness of the pit isn't nearly so scary when there's someone else there with him.

Hannibal, for all his loquaciousness, is relatively quiet now. Just deep rumbles and loud huffs, as he fucks into Will, selfishly using his body - but that's alright, he's earned it, Will is being good and it's Hannibal's right to take that goodness for himself - and planting bruising into the backs of his thighs. He's trembling, body angled perfectly so Hannibal brushes against that spot inside him that feels so earth-shatteringly good when it's touched.

He's made room, and he wants Hannibal to make himself at home. He jerks at his restraints, toes curling, wanting to grab, to urge, deeper, *harder*. Will can take it. He's the only one in the world who can bear Hannibal's cruelty and kindness. He can take it, he *will* take it, whatever Hannibal chooses to give him.

The world feels like so much. Will has narrowed down to this point, to this space where they are one, and it is infinite. Hannibal drags Will's hips down harder, growls praise that has Will's cock leaking against his belly. Will could live here, in this moment, this one moment where he knows he's good, he's worth wanting.

Hannibal's teeth find his jaw, trailing little red bites up to his ear. "Come for me, sweet boy. I want to feel you tight with pleasure around me." The words come out slightly hasty, half-slurred as Hannibal seeks his completion in Will. Will arches his spine and searches for that peace, that obedience that crawls down his back and crashes in his stomach, tearing him into pieces that shake and crave and *come*.

Will spills wet and hot over his own belly, wordless and mindless in his pleasure. He's learned to take whatever he's given, and as Hannibal draws out his orgasm with deep, rolling thrusts, Will falls. He falls and he falls, pleasure a constant pulse, a wave that crashes through him and into Hannibal, the two of them reverberating through each other.

When he comes back to himself, Hannibal is there, his teeth sharp over Will's throat. He bites down when he comes, not hard enough to draw blood, and Will's aching moan is regretful. Next time he'll beg for it, for the thrum of life between Hannibal's teeth, so that Will can look into him and draw that feeling back into himself.

Hannibal cleans him afterwards, with a cloth instead of a cold, sharp spray. He frees one of Will's hands and leaves the other. For the first time in what must be forever, Will finds himself tucked into a real bed, under an actual blanket.

"Thank you," he mouths, sound sticking in his throat, caught in a sudden wave of feeling. Hannibal catches his meaning anyway. There's nothing Hannibal misses.

"Good things come to good boys," he says, his lips a whisper over Will's cheek.

Will is in bliss. The days with Hannibal are the happiest he's ever been, the nights make him sick with joy. Hannibal's rules and schedule are concrete and unchanging. WIll is to be naked at all times when in Hannibal's home. Hannibal does not make him cook, that will always be

a task he enjoys and remains in charge of, but he will have Will rise with him, they shower together, touches lingering under the spray, until Will is clean, and can sink to his knees to drink Hannibal down amidst shower spray and his dominant's soft, pleased moans.

Then, breakfast. Will helps in the kitchen when he's asked, but more often than not Hannibal has him kneel in the dining room, waiting for his food. Hannibal hand feeds him, when they have time, pieces of crisp bacon, or some other rich meat, warm bread, fresh fruits or slices of cheese.

When Hannibal goes to work, sometimes Will joins him. When he doesn't, he is left to clean and arrange the house, and has permission to drive to his house and tend to his dogs. Hannibal promises they can build a kennel in the backyard, and Will is allowed to keep two as long as he continues to behave himself. He already knows which ones he'll take, and makes arrangements for the others to be adopted.

Hannibal usually comes home at five, and Will is to be on his knees in the dining room unless called to help with dinner.

Sometimes, though, if the day is light and there is maybe one patient or two or just paperwork and note-taking, Will is told to kneel up on the second floor and wait patiently during Hannibal's patients, or told to kneel at Hannibal's feet while he takes his notes and does the rest of the obligatory paperwork necessary for such a highly-sought psychiatrist.

Will likes those days, the most. Likes having his cheek on Hannibal's knee, a hand in his hair, idly brushing through his curls whenever Hannibal's mind wanders. He's allowed to speak, because Hannibal likes their little conversations, always has. As long as Will is good and does as he's told, he is as free as he's ever been, and more grounded than he can remember being in his life.

"You're going to fire your last patient," he says on one such day, his eyes closed as he drifts quietly at Hannibal's side.

Hannibal's pen pauses in its scratching. "Am I?"

Will hums thoughtfully. "You hadn't decided yet. But you will. He's too attached. Doms don't wear collars," he adds, reaching up to tug at the padlock on his own. The weight reassures him. He had minimal scarring, in the end, and now it feels so nice to have that constant reminder of Hannibal with him. A reminder to be good. To try, even when it's hard.

"I suspect a collar wouldn't stop his attachment," Hannibal says wryly. "Franklyn attaches to his therapists to avoid having to deal with therapy."

"He's needy. A lot of subs are." Will is, sometimes. Well, often. He can't help himself. Submission comes so much easier when Hannibal is there to correct him, to guide him when he steps out of line or forgets himself.

"They need nurturing," Hannibal agrees, leaning back to smile down at him. Will has a vague memory of a conversation from long ago. From another lifetime.

“Nurturing,” he says slowly. “Protective doms. Sometimes wrathful ones.”

“And what do you make of me?” Hannibal asks.

Will frowns and shakes his head. “You don’t fit the pathology,” he says, “You’re just Hannibal.”

Hannibal hums, and for a moment Will fears he misstepped somehow, but the gentle touch of thumb to cheekbone assuages that fear. Will’s jaw, his neck, are peppered with bite marks, old and new. He likes the feeling of pressure against them.

“Like God,” Hannibal muses.

Will nods. “Without question. Without uncertainty,” he confirms. “Assured. Capable…. Powerful.” He breathes in, looks up. “The Ripper’s like God.”

Hannibal’s thumb stills, just for a moment. His head tilts.

“And what, dear boy,” he says, very quietly, an edge of steel, “do you make of the Ripper?”

Will blinks. His brow furrows. He knows, he should know -. More flickers, echoes of his own voice, lick at the base of his skull. But those voices belong to another Will. To another time. Something vitriolic and hateful and not how he is now.

Hannibal’s thumb smooths over the crease in his brow, and Will sighs, the thought gone as soon as it began. He looks up. “You are like God. The Ripper is like God.” He turns his head, nuzzling Hannibal’s wrist. “Everything all at once. Something to be worshipped.” He wets his lips. “Admired. Adored.”

Hannibal hums. He cradles Will’s chin in a gentle hand, makes him lift his eyes again.

“And you, Will?” he asks. “Are you something to be worshipped? Are you like God?”

Will swallows. His fingers flex nervously on his thighs. He knows Hannibal admires him. Adores him. But worship is something Other, something dominants get. Will isn’t a dominant. He’s not God. Eyes gaze at him from the darkness of his own mind, assessing. They feel like Hannibal’s, and make his cheeks flush.

“No,” he finally breathes, when he can’t hold his breath any longer. “No. I belong...here.” He feels the truth of it, the weight of certainty. Maybe it’s faith. Maybe it’s something more insidious than that, like love. “On my knees. In front of my God.”

Hannibal’s eyes are dark, but shine with that satisfied, pleased air. His cheeks bulge in a not-smile, and he hums to himself, releasing Will’s chin. Will hopes he didn’t see the lapse, hopes Hannibal still wants him, but the pit is wide and deep and Will can feel himself clawing at the edges of it, not in control of his own hands.

It’s safe in the darkness. Hannibal is here. But -.

“Hush, my sweet boy,” Hannibal says, and silences the little whimper clogging Will’s throat. “You know how to make it go away. Don’t you remember what I taught you?”

There is a place inside Will’s head. A space that used to be empty, a space that Hannibal fills with every breath Will takes. He twists on his knees, seeking permission as he settles himself beneath the desk, between Hannibal’s thighs.

“Go ahead, Will.”

Sometimes, Will just needs a reminder. Another dose. This will make it better. It’s good for him.

Hannibal takes care of the belt, but Will works the button open with lips and tongue, leaving damp spots on Hannibal’s slacks that neither of them will feel bad about. He catches the zipper in his teeth, tugging it down one notch at a time, until he can finally nose his way within. Take a deep breath of Hannibal’s scent, clumsily work open the front of his briefs.

Hannibal is only half-hard, but that just means Will can take him further with little effort. He swallows around him, coaxing his dominant into arousal the way only he can. The way he’s been trained. Because Will is a good boy, an obedient boy.

Will closes his eyes, his nose buried in wiry curls, the head of Hannibal’s cock nudging at the back of his throat. A hand settles on the back of his neck, grounding and perfect, and he can feel himself slipping down, down, into the quiet. Into the perfect bliss of oblivion.

Everything is better here, at the bottom of the pit, with Hannibal.

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